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THE 'MAN-STORIES' OF A BLACK SNAKE

THE 'MAN-STORIES' OF A BLACK SNAKE

BY

W. A. B.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY CAPTAIN MAURICE D. BELL, R.A.

FRONTISPIECE AND MAP

LONDON
WHITTAKER & CO., WHITE HART STREET
1898

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'Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field.'

Genesis.

INTRODUCTION.

A CERTAIN critic gave it as his opinion that there were two classes to whom these unusual pages would particularly appeal. He thought that children would one and all immediately make friends with Wriggle and Coila; Uncle Stretcher for them would be no conception of the imagination, but a teacher full of wisdom and experience; and as he drew upon the stores of his memory, every child would listen in breathless sympathy while his emotions of love or of fear, of laughter or of tears, were in turn excited by the serpent's subtle tongue. But in this opinion I am bound to say I do not concur. There runs, it is true, an apparent simpleness throughout the book, but this has been a natural outcome of the ideas which the author holds with reference to the intelligence

of the lower animals and their connection with man. This, in short, is not intrinsically a child's book at all; rather is it a book for the mature-minded.

The class of men is growing larger day by day which craves for the knowledge of that which 'eye hath not seen'; these are the persons whom this critic believed would chiefly take an interest in the following pages, and to whom I am now addressing these words.

The 'Snake Stories' first took shape in the author's mind as long ago as 1893, but they only assumed concrete form in the winter of 1895–96. They were written while the influence of the Bush still powerfully moved him, partly, indeed, with a view to describing that wonderful Wild West of Tasmania so little known even to the inhabitants of Tasmania itself.

I suppose all who have travelled away from civilisation, be it for ever so short a distance, have felt the strange weight of solitude which presses upon their minds, and know how that feeling gradually gives place to a sensation of deepest content, as a thousand companions are disclosed to them in bird and beast and tree.

These men will appreciate the fact that the author has dwelt for long in the closest communion with Nature, and has written these 'stories' while still imbued with her mystic teachings.

From such a standpoint the nexus of the snake is neither grotesque nor unnecessary. Some such setting, indeed, was essential to visualise the characters and bring the tales into one complete cycle of life in those wild parts.

But the main 'note' of these sketches is not graphic. Throughout them a certain attitude towards the lower animals is constantly displayed, and it is of this, to which I have already referred, that I will now speak.

In the study of evolution comparatively little attention has been bestowed upon the mental side of the question. Nor is this surprising, since only of late years has psychology advanced to the dignity of an exact science, and until that was the case all theories on mental phenomena were bound to be more or less elusive. Now, however, this is changed, and it is seen that physical and mental progress have ever advanced side by side. The following stories contain many

allusions to this subject, but there is one theory which stands out clearly from the commencement; the writer evidently holds that carnal limitations alone constrain intellect in the lower animals. This theory is early emphasised when, in the second section, the serpent accepts the accuracy of a familiar legend; and throughout the 'stories' this theme is developed and dwelt upon. All intelligence is one whether in man or beast, so pleads the author with most insistent constancy. What may seem inferior or different to that of man is merely intelligence identical with his, but temporarily prisoned in a material frame of less adequate development.

Here again we find justification for the nexus of the snake. In choosing as his oracle the creature most repulsive to the human idea — a venomous serpent — the author, indeed, would seem to symbolise the absolute universality of this principle of intellectual affinity among sentient beings.

It would be wearisome to indicate every place where this theme crops up, but one striking example may be given. The incident of *The Baby* (an incident, by the way, for

which I believe there is chapter and verse) shows us undeveloped human intellect on friendly terms with the suppressed intellectuality of the lower animals. The nervousness of the encounter, the growth of confidence is portrayed, the whole intimacy only to be broken by the advent of a woman, that is, of a secondary intellect of highest development. While dealing with this 'story' I ought, perhaps, to mention that *The Cradle Song*, as also *The Fossicker's Toast* later on, have both been published apart from their context. They are included in a small collection of verse recently issued in Melbourne (Australia).

Granting, then, this theory of the universality of the intellectual principle, the interesting question arises as to how this principle has attained to such surprising growth in man. The most probable explanation would seem to be not (as is so often held) that the physical changes of evolution are alone responsible, but that the gregarious instinct, working through what we call civilisation, has at least been an equally important factor in its advance.

By co-operation, by division of labour, above all, by compelling the lower animals to

perform for him much of the drudgery of life, man has relieved himself from many of the cares attending the struggle for existence and has given himself time to think, and to allow a fuller development of his mental faculties; while (compelled to perform man's service, their intellects crushed or forced into unusual channels) other creatures have had scant opportunity to progress along the line foreshadowed by nature.

Many illustrations of this view will be found by a careful reader, and one more forcible, if somewhat negative in character, is met with in the last chapter, *The Hermit of Settlement Island*, where the transcendental undercurrent of the previous chapters almost approaches the boundaries of mysticism. In this scene a man who has renounced the pleasures and ease of life amongst his fellows, who has returned to the solitude of the primeval forest, accidentally regains a strange intimacy with intellect in a less advanced stage of evolution. Here is no longer a question of undeveloped or of secondary human intellect, of rough miners' life and every-day interests; the repressed spirituality of the serpent comes face to face with the

highest development of mental force known upon earth. The text is, however, sufficiently plain to render further comment from me unnecessary.

To those who are acquainted with Eastern philosophy, who have read the religious books of the East, above all, who have studied the lives and superstitions of the natives of Asia, this idea of the universality of intellect will not of course be new, but under this new guise it cannot fail to interest.

Apart from the philosophical tenets laid before the reader in these stories, there is also a certain humour displayed in the tables being at length turned upon man, particularly upon those sturdy members of the race who from the very circumstances of their lives would naturally indulge in 'Snake Stories,' a humour perhaps sufficiently indicated by the surname of Stretcher.

But I have detained the reader long enough; it now only remains for me to point out that the seemingly chance or even careless sequence of the stories actually furthers the dual objects of their author.

M. D. B.

THE 'MAN-STORIES' OF A BLACK SNAKE.

I.

UNCLE STRETCHER GLIDES UPON THE SCENE.

WIDOW SCALEY lay sunning herself in the horizontal scrub, close to where the myrtles tumbled over the ridge. It is no easy matter to sun yourself in the horizontal scrub, for the weft and woof of the forest are close knit on the Tasmanian West Coast—the 'Wild West' of the antipodean prospector. But Widow Scaley had seen some years pass, and she knew spots fifty feet above ground where she could curl comfortably (no slight qualifi-

cation when you remember she was over eight feet in length, white man's measure, and of ample proportions) and see sunshine. However, what with provedoring while the children were at Doctor Scuttler's, and tending them when they were not, there was little time for the elegancies of life. It was all very well for Uncle Stretcher—artful fellow! —to offer what he thought comfort on Scaley's death. That event meant much more to her than he ever understood. It is always the same with your confirmed bachelor—utter ignorance of responsibility; let things take care of themselves.

Widow Scaley lay sunning herself in the horizontal, close to where the myrtles tumbled over the ridge. Far to the south-east rose the Frenchman's Cap, though its thousand feet of precipice was concealed from view; to the north lay the ranges dominated by Heemskirk and Zeehan, rugged peaks which, of all *terra incognita*, first attracted the notice of the old Dutch navigators (and to

which the names of their galleons have been given), the earliest ministers of the white man that had ever cleaved those turbulent, mysterious seas. As far as the eye could reach, the landscape rolled in ridge and valley, so thickly clad with dense forest that only an occasional summit showed naked rock like a scar on the billowy softness. A hot invisible steam quivered in the streaming sunshine, for not a breath of air was stirring, and the undergrowth exhaled a heavy earth-vapour that rose above even the topmost branches. It was one of those divine days that summer often brings to the West Coast, when the soaring thoughts of men and other creatures yearn to the suffusing depths, to the dreamy vacancy of the cloudless heavens, and they become filled with strange ecstasies and with new hopes. The sun shone hotly in patches through the myrtle-boughs and the more vivid green of the sassafras, and one patch of light flickered on the glistening coils of Widow Scaley.

Anyone seeing her so still and motionless might have thought she slept, were it not that ever and anon her eyes, which were gleaming like twin jewels in the sunshine, turned blue and sightless as she screened them with blue cuticle. Appearances are deceptive among snakes—in reality Widow Scaley was enjoying a good deep think.

The fact was, Uncle Stretcher had recently cast doubts upon the benefits derived by Wriggle and Coila from Doctor Scuttler's teaching. 'It is all toxicology and gymnastics,' he had said when last he saw her. 'Toxicology, indeed! before the children have cut their wisdom teeth, before their fangs are strong! And what is the good of learning the back-throw before their gristle has set? Then those fascination exercises. While they are making believe to fascinate a bit of lichen, old Scuttler is licking his jaws at the thought of the frogs you will put him in the way of for fee. I don't believe in this higher education, *I* don't. It is simply higher education

to insure Scuttler a good time without any trouble. When you find a nice little dinner hopping overhead—bless it—I should like to see the snake that wouldn't exercise all the fascination in him without any teaching! And a lot of Scuttler's maxims you are likely to remember on such occasions, aren't you? Bah! I don't think a hiss of the fellow. There are only two things an ordinary snake wants to know about in this world—meals and Man. How to get enough of the one with as little as possible of the other—that's the great problem. Now Scuttler has never honestly caught a meal in his life, and he knows nothing whatever of Man.'

So spake Uncle Stretcher, and his words went home to the widow, for she knew better than Uncle Stretcher what it was to cater for a family and provide school-fees—in frogs, mind you—for the Doctor as well; and this in a district with more snakes than could comfortably exist together! Then she remembered the last time the Doctor spoke

to her, after she had tried to reduce his fees a frog a month, and what he said about society and social systems — how it was a privilege to dwell in a community of so many snakes, and how that privilege must be paid for, and how a frog a month was not a proper subject of discussion in civilised circles. Truly the Doctor knew very little of the difficulty of finding food if he could say such a thing as that; and, after all, it was food-finding to which Wriggle and Coila would have to devote their best energies in the future. Then Man. Ugh! how she shuddered at the very thought of poor Scaley's death. Now if Uncle Stretcher were only the Doctor, there would be no fear of Wriggle or Coila meeting a like fate through want of knowledge; for if ever a snake knew Man, Uncle Stretcher was that one. Knew Man? Why, she just thought he did. Knew him; and what was more, knew his language, his thoughts, his everything. How often, when he had been telling

her one of his thrilling tales, had she not had to beg him to stop for fear Wriggle or Coila might overhear and get frightened? Yet, if what Uncle Stretcher said was correct, the sooner they now learnt about Man the better. Of course education was education, and she didn't want any of her family to grow up underbred. She did not want them to miss anything that the Doctor might have to teach, but hereafter the elegancies of life must take a secondary place to the necessaries—Wriggle and Coila would have to come out with her, and learn tracking and hunting. She would also speak about this question of Man-knowledge to Uncle Stretcher next time he was back from his travels. She would not consent to Wriggle and Coila running any unnecessary risks. Uncle Stretcher would probably propose that they should accompany him. That, of course, was not to be thought of; but he might very well tell them some of his experiences, in order that they might see what sort of

a creature Man was, and gain an idea of the way to elude him in case of need.

Thus Widow Scaley thought, when she suddenly raised her delicate little head. It was set on a neck so gracefully curved that it had been the despair of many a young gallant in the days before Scaley came upon the scene—turned up suddenly from nobody knew where — and won her by superior cunning and strength. She had felt a vibration betokening an approach, and she listened in a nervous, high-strung way, shooting her narrow blue tongue, quivering like a spirit flame, in and out the while. 'Something!' she exclaimed; 'I felt something.' But no sound as yet came to corroborate the accuracy of her perception.

Presently, from far away below, a faint rustle, and the little head of Widow Scaley, which had been veering in as undetermined a fashion as the distracted finger of a magnetic compass, immediately fixed itself in that direction. Then, with a grace and ease

impossible of description, the long glistening black body followed the head and neck, already curving and disappearing between branch and bough like an animate needle, down, down into the leafy depths of the undergrowth.

At the bottom such light as chanced to penetrate was dim, diffused, and green; and the great myrtle boles shot insolently up, without wasting a single leaf, from the rank tangle of creeper and shrub and root. In the clear spaces quite an army of fern-trees spread their funereal-looking plumes, lending a kind of theatrical wealth to the scene; while many of the larger trunks were covered with a translucent-leaved hanging fern, which gave them a fictitious appearance of being bathed in a flood of green limelight. The air also was heavier and perhaps cooler, though the physical effect of the heat remained about the same. Widow Scaley cared, however, for none of these things. The one thought that filled her mind was—

Is it foe, food, or friend? Her eyes rapidly adapted themselves to the changed conditions, and when about ten feet off the ground she espied beneath her another black snake, even larger than herself, evidently awaiting her coming.

'Dear me!' she exclaimed, as her eyes rested on the stranger; 'what a wonderful world this is, to be sure! Here have I been arranging all sorts of matters in my mind to await your return, and lo! no sooner have I done so than I find you back. Could anything be happier? Well, how are you?' she continued, with undisguised pleasure, as she touched the ground and coiled affectionately round Uncle Stretcher. 'What news do you bring?'

And that night, in the moss-covered hole under the old myrtle tree, after the children (who came home in charge of their tutor a few minutes later—for no snake, let alone young snakes, remains out after sunset in those parts, except during a short period of

the year)—after, I say, the children had been put to bed, it was arranged that Uncle Stretcher should relate his experience with Man to them in judicious doses. And Uncle Stretcher, like the real old traveller that he was, did not seem at all averse to the idea of so unsophisticated an audience.

II.

A Chapter of Interrogation.

There was an unexpected difficulty in the way of carrying out Widow Scaley's scheme for the enlightenment of her offspring on the subject of Man. This was their complete ignorance of what sort of thing Man was; for the Scaley household lay surrounded by scrub so thick that the hardiest prospector could not reckon upon a greater rate of progress than at most a mile a day, and this with no attempt at permanently opening up a track. On some of those rare occasions when a man had fought his way, literally inch by inch, through this tangle, it would often happen that, thanks to the peculiar habits of the 'horizon-

tal,' he would find himself as likely as not clambering many feet above the surface of the ground. This natural indifference as to elevation of path pursued made the chances of one of those rare visitors coming within view of the infant snakes extremely remote. As a matter of fact, they had never seen a man. Uncle Stretcher accordingly found himself pulled up at the very outset by this perplexing but perfectly natural question from Wriggle.

'My dear child,' replied the elder snake, when he had turned the situation this way and that, 'a man is an animal like ourselves, only extremely cunning and dangerous.'

'Anything like a bunyip,' asked Coila, who, in common with other young creatures in the Antipodes, had naturally a place in her mythology for the spectral sea-calf of the Australian aboriginal, just in the same way as we humans are acquainted with products of equally unrealisable origin.

'No, not at all,' replied her uncle; 'there

are no longer any bunyips. A man, on the other hand, is a great big animal rising up ever so high into the air. Come!' he continued, pointing to where a rotting gum stump showed daylight through its base, and otherwise somewhat resembled the figure of a man in the gloom of the forest; 'a man is something like a moving tree.'

'How can it move if it is up in the air?' asked Wriggle. 'Does it fly?'

'No. It walks on legs, just as once upon a time we snakes used to do.'

'What!' cried the two infants together, utterly forgetting Man in their astonishment; 'we walk on legs!'

'Like a tiger?' added Coila, interrogatively.

'Like a tiger!' put in Wriggle, contemptuously; 'like a wallaby, of course. Whoever saw a tiger with a tail like ours?'*

'Both wrong,' laughed Uncle Stretcher. 'We used to walk like Cousin Lizard, but

* The Tasmanian tiger.

Man walks more like a wallaby without a tail, or a bird.'

'Then is he furry?' asked Coila.

'Furry!' said Wriggle; 'whoever saw a bird furry?'

'But wallabies are,' protested Coila.

'He is neither,' said their uncle. 'He wears clothes, and is whatever they are—woolly, or leathery, or furry, or a lot of things, just as it pleases him.'

'What a wonderful creature!' exclaimed Coila; but Wriggle was silent, lost in thought. 'I can't make that out at all!' he exclaimed at length. 'What are clothes?'

'Clothes are something like our skins,' replied his uncle. 'When you are older you will find out you get a new skin every year. Well, men get one as often as they like, because they have arms and legs to work their will.'

'And are men good to eat?' inquired the practical Wriggle.

His uncle laughed. 'You would not ask

that,' he said, 'if you had seen one. Anything more unappetising than a man, especially when he spies you, would be hard to imagine.'

'Why, is he too tough or too big?'

'No; it's not size or toughness. Only if any eating is to be done, it's not the snake that will do it.' This was rather enigmatical, and so Uncle Stretcher seemed to think, for he added immediately afterwards, 'However, you'll understand that better later on. He is very dangerous to snakes.'

'Oh! dangerous,' said Wriggle, the idea just dawning on him. 'You mean he might fall down on us?' This inference, of course, arose through the comparison of Man to a tree; and the fall of trees was one of the principal dangers of the forest.

'Wrong again,' replied Uncle Stretcher. 'He hates snakes as we hate him, and he kills every one of us he is able to. It all comes, you see, from the days when snakes had legs.'

'Oh, do tell us all about it,' said the children, now thoroughly interested. And this is what Uncle Stretcher told them that evening, amid the hush of the forest, in the hole under the myrtle tree.

'A very long while ago,' he began, 'all our family, as I have already told you, possessed legs; and we resembled our cousins the lizards, and walked and ran about. In those days, so far as was known, there were no men; but at length it came to the knowledge of our patron that two had recently been brought into existence who were represented as being superior animals to all the rest. The couple, it transpired, were having a very pleasant time of it indeed at a place called Eden. Now our patron had a standing grudge against everything outside his control, for his was a disappointed ambition. This, of course made him extremely zealous on his own behalf. Accordingly, he investigated the title of these two beings to exceptional happiness, and found that if he could prevail upon

them to break the covenant under which they enjoyed it, he would upset the plans for that happiness. Accordingly, he did our remote ancestor the great honour of taking him into his confidence (some, indeed, aver that he himself assumed the disguise of a serpent. However this may be, he paid us a very high tribute for intelligence and tact). The result of that mission was perfectly successful, and Man's happy home was destroyed. As a retribution, however, for our participation in this more or less wanton deed, our race was deprived of its legs, and condemned to crawl for ever afterwards. Man, being fully aware of the part played by our ancestor, or our patron masquerading in his guise, has ever since cherished a feeling of resentment, which has now become an hereditary and open hostility, so that it is only by the exercise of great circumspection and cunning that we are now able to hold our own against his advancing progress. You will see from this that the question of Man is a most important

one for us snakes—the more so, indeed, of recent years, in that I am afraid our intelligence department has failed to keep pace with that of Man. Nothing, in my opinion, can be more foolish than the policy of retiring before the approach of Man, since the more we withdraw, the easier becomes his advance, and the less chance of effecting a truce upon reasonable terms. My experience has taught me that there are men now in existence (though truly very few), who even take a friendly interest in our race. If only by some means we could persuade Man we were of use to him, he would, I am convinced, at once stay his hand against us.

'My roving life (and perhaps, a little, my love of good things, with which Man knows so well how to surround himself) had led me into many an escapade, and I have been able to study this subject in a manner probably unrivalled in all our records. Were your poor father now alive, he would be able in some respects, to corroborate what I say. As

it is, your mother knows my adventures well by repute. But now, children, you have had quite enough put in your little heads for one day, so coil up and go to sleep. To-morrow evening I shall have some more to tell you. Good-night.'

III.

The Baby.

Now, although Uncle Stretcher had often to stop and explain what this and that meant to the voracious young intelligences of his nephew and niece, and though, no doubt, he gained enormously in authority among them thereby, it is not my intention so to disjoint his narrative, except where the importance of the subject renders it unavoidable. It must therefore be understood in the most definite manner, that in all Uncle Stretcher's stories the points requiring explanation to Wriggle and Coila were duly dealt with at the time; but possessing no particular interest for the human reader, who, of course, is quite familiar

with them, the ensuing conversations are not here reproduced.

The very next evening, true to his word, Uncle Stretcher began his stories to a breathless audience of two little snakes and their mother. Uncle Stretcher was lying like a bit of loose ribband on the moss at the entrance to the hole, for the night was hot; but Wriggle and Coila were each curled up like rope-ends on board ship through sheer excitement—life had suddenly grown so very interesting. 'I feel almost as if I could break in two,' said Wriggle to Coila; and his sister was about to reply, when Widow Scaley said 'Hush!' in so authoritative a tone that all comment ceased, and the old snake began:—

'Seeing you so snugly coiled up reminds me of a little Man-baby I once knew, whose acquaintance nearly cost me my life.

'Some years before I met your father, I was living down beyond Lake St Clair, over to the east from here. The district lies on the borders of human settlement, and the

people had just started their now deserted overland track to Macquarie Harbour. That made it somewhat lively, and we snakes had to look out for ourselves, I can tell you. Well, I had taken up my quarters in a hollow log near an out-station where they kept a cow. It was convenient for the cream, which I like fresh; and it just suited my palate to slip in of a hot night and lap the afternoon milking. Indeed, that log occupied a commanding position in every respect, for many is the rat I got in the stable hard by, in addition to the cream already mentioned and the security from attack it afforded. Matters had been very quiet, considering the number of bushmen about, for some time past, when one hot night in February, as I was on my way to the dairy as usual, I heard a strange sound. It wasn't the wind, nor the trees, nor the river, nor a bird, though it sounded first like one and then like another of these by turns. I couldn't make it out, and lay quite still in the grass, listening for a long time, till it stopped;

and then I glided on. Just as I reached the dairy it came again quite loud, and then I knew that it was a woman singing. Now, if there is anything I love more than cream and eggs it is music, and the voice was so sweet and clear, I thought I had never heard any music like this. So I glided closer, till I came across the path right up to the verandah. The door of the room was open, and I could see the singer rocking a little cot within; and the movement made her voice swell and die, and then swell again, till my heart nearly jumped into my throat, and I quivered all over from sheer joy. Then I couldn't help but glide a little nearer still, till I was almost in the room. On she sang and on, pausing every now and again, and commencing afresh when she came to the end, so as to soothe her baby which I saw lying in the cot, and to send it to sleep. And if you want to know the sort of things men say to their babies in their songs, this is what she sang:—

Sleep, Bonnie, sleep! the sun is low,
And Jack * has laughed his last goodnight;
The little zephyrs come and go,
The timid stars begin to light.
Sleep, Bonnie, sleep! I hear the mopoke† calling;
The sun is down, and vesper dews are falling.
Sleep, Dearie, sleep!

Sleep, Bonnie, sleep! the bush is still,
And silent every cautious tread;
The fishes slumber in the rill,
The busy ants lie all abed.
Sleep, Bonnie, sleep! the wilderness is sleeping;
Securely rest in Heaven's gracious keeping.
Sleep, Dearie, sleep!

'I confess,' continued Uncle Stretcher, 'that I felt rather small when she sang about the "cautious tread" and the "wilderness sleeping," because it suddenly occurred to me that I *was* out rather late, and . . . . and, well, *you* know, or you soon will. But, nevertheless, I thought the idea of a mother spending such talented sweetness in soothing her baby very beautiful, and I was so encouraged by this

* Jack—the laughing jackass.
† Mopoke—the Boobook owl.

idea that I found myself right inside the room before I knew what I was doing. Luckily no one saw me, for the woman was alone, and was too much occupied with her child and her tender devices to put it to sleep to notice anything else; so I glided quietly under a table where the shadows concealed me, and listened while she sang yet another verse, which ran something like this:—

Sleep, Bonnie, sleep! so cool and calm
On high the stooping moon doth ride!
O baby mine, fear never harm
While mother watches at thy side.
Sleep, Bonnie, sleep! I hear the mopoke calling;
The sun is down, and vesper dews are falling.
Sleep, Dearie, sleep!

'I think she must have been an Australian, and she probably learnt the words from her mother when she also was weak and helpless.

'Presently the baby lay quiet, and the woman, rising softly, turned the lamp low, and went out on to the verandah. But the melody of the song still dwelt in my ears, till gradually a strange curiosity seized me to see

the little creature that had inspired it. Nevertheless, I tried hard to fight against the inclination, lest my coming might disturb the child and so lead to my discovery; but argue as I would, I felt I must go—the impulse was absolutely irresistible. So quite noiselessly I glided up to the little wicker basket, now lying still on its wooden rockers, and raised my head over the brim.

'Yes, there it slept, pink and dimpled in the vague light, with fair curly hair just covering its brows, and one plump little bare arm upon the coverlet, the idle hand half clenched in baby listlessness. Of the many clenched hands I have seen, that was the first which conveyed no menace to my safety. I cannot say how it was, because I was under the spell of the music all the time, but when I saw this, and these thoughts occurred to me, I must needs come still closer, until I had passed my head into the soft tiny hand. Dear, how tender and warm it was! And I could feel the throbbing of the little heart,

pit-pat, pit-pat, quite distinctly. Then I moved my head from side to side in the innocent clasp, and so worked it right through till my neck was surrounded by the small chubby fingers. By this time all my body was in the cot.

'Suddenly the child made a movement and the spell was broken. I, who a minute before had been working myself forward, was now all eagerness to escape. This, however, was just what I found myself unable to do, for as the child gained consciousness its clasp tightened, and you have no idea what the grip of a Man-baby is. Of course I hissed and struggled, but it was useless, as I had no leverage, and the child held me in the very part I required free. Then I lay still, pretending to be lifeless, so that the instant the child's grasp relaxed I might dart away; and, behold, a wonderful thing happened.

'For the child put out its other hand and began softly and regularly to stroke my body the way of the scales. I had never felt any-

thing so soothing in my life before. And it crowed and laughed, lifting my head up close to its own, so that I might have struck it, and swaying me gently to and fro in its arms, till the memory of the song returned like a homing echo, and I was no longer frightened, but nestled myself against its flesh enjoying the warmth and the movement. Then I put out my tongue and licked its moist lips again and again.

'And the child smiled.

'All this must have lasted for about an hour, when I became conscious of something approaching, and the next moment, before I had time to form any plans for my safety, the door softly opened, and the mother returned with a broom in her hand, which she had apparently been using in another part of the household. Then the child crowed yet more loudly, and while its attention was distracted, I managed to glide a little way down. But hardly had my head touched the floor (the greater part of my length being still in the

cot, for it lay quite low) than she perceived me, and with a piercing shriek raised the broom to deal me a blow. I saw it poised in the air, and my heart thumped, for I expected the next instant to find my backbone broken, and nothing more for me to do in this world than to bite myself out of misery, when she suddenly fell in a heap on the ground, right across the doorway. I did not know what to make of it, and divined it was some cunning plan the more surely to slay me. Nevertheless, I seized the moment's grace accorded, to glide once more under the table, where for some minutes I remained panting and thinking. All this while the woman, still motionless, lay across the doorway. At length, after I had cooled down a little, it occurred to me that if events were going to march so slowly, there might be a cranny between them through which an active snake like I then was might escape. So I began to nose towards the woman, deploying in the shadow close to the wainscot. I went as near

to her as I judged safe, and took a look. Her face resembled that of the baby, only older, and the eyes were shut and her features blanched and drawn. I could not perceive any movement of mouth or nostril. Surely it could be no trap? No, thought I, assuredly here is no trap; she is insensible or ailing. And I was the more ready to take this view when I thought of her beautiful singing, for no one who could sing like that would stoop to a deadly deceit.

'Meanwhile time was flying, and seeing that her form alone barred the way to liberty I determined to pass over it. Now to cross her feet would, in case I happened to be mistaken, and she were really awaiting my coming after all, place me at a disadvantage, for she could attack me without fear of reprisal. Self-preservation therefore dictated that I should pass over her within reach of her flesh. I accordingly determined to cross by her neck. No sooner had I come to this conclusion than I put it into effect, and

though her skin was as soft as that of her baby I did not linger; which notwithstanding, and though she made no movement, the passage seemed interminable.'

So saying, Uncle Stretcher, declaring he had yarned enough for one night, glided down into the hole under the myrtle tree without inviting further discussion.

IV.

A Tragedy of Pick and Shovel.

'The story I told you yesterday,' observed Uncle Stretcher the next evening, as he dropped down from an overhanging branch on to the ground beneath, where Coila and Wriggle were already awaiting him, 'depended largely for its interest on the part I played myself. In what I am now going to relate to you I took no share. My knowledge of the facts arises partly from observation, but chiefly from listening to the speech of men.

'You have probably heard me frequently mention a mining camp called Zeehan. It lies away up to the north, many miles from

here. Well, some years ago, hearing the rats that then swarmed the humpies, shanties, and stores of that district well spoken of, I made my way over and found (thanks to the scarcity of cats) that report for once had not outrun veracity.'

At this point Uncle Stretcher paused to explain to Wriggle that by cats he did not mean the native cat, but a domestic animal much esteemed by men. Wriggle, it may be added, being naturally of an inquiring frame of mind, was in the habit of interrupting his uncle far more often than was his sister.

'It would be difficult,' continued the old snake, 'to convey to you who have never even seen a tent, what a mining township is like. You must know men make their holes above ground, and range them in lines they call streets; and in these places they dwell as thick as ants do in their nests. Their holes at Zeehan are made of wood, of metal, and of canvas, and they all front a street two

miles long if it is a yard. Down this street, men, at the time of which I speak, used to walk and ride night and day, and the heavy waggons lumbered along churning the ground, wet with the early autumn rains, into mud, at places axle deep, so that the strings of pack-horses bearing provisions to outlying camps further away among the mountains were often floundering in it up to their hocks. But while this went on between the rows of yellow and red painted buildings, immediately behind stood the forest—at first nothing but blackened and scorched stumps, a graveyard of dead and forgotten beauty; but further back, gums and myrtles, as in the days before Man arrived. And here I dwelt all one summer, living by day in the forest, but in the sultry evenings as the sun was setting beyond Mount Zeehan, gliding cautiously across the clearing down to the houses, where under the flooring, in the free space between earth and joist, I lurked till I might creep about unnoticed. And so I

caught many a rat. But it is not of rats I have now to speak.

'In the course of this life I frequented many houses, and perforce saw, and at length recognised, many men and a few women (for men preponderated); and so I learnt their habits and their occupations, and even their secret hopes and thoughts. With the men, most were for "striking it rich" in the mines or bargaining their scrip at a profit, so that they might possess money with which to speculate more largely and live at ease; and with the women, their hopes lay in husband or sweetheart, in father or brother winning more than he had brought, and leaving the field to dwell in a quieter and more civilised district, where talk and thought was not entirely of gain or luck, and where other women lived to keep each other company.

'But among these women there was one who cherished larger hopes. This person was a seamstress, by name Alice Huron. Living alone in a small, two-roomed, weather-

board house, remarkable for its shingle roof (where most of the houses were covered with iron sheeting), she would, in the ordinary course of events, have attracted little notice in the excited whirl of a new mining centre, but for three reasons. She had been one of the first arrivals in the early days of the field, when she earned justly merited popularity among the pioneers by her pluck and good-nature; secondly, the piquancy of her personal charms; and thirdly, by her love of speculation. She was indeed generally credited with possessing a controlling interest in several of the most promising claims of the district. Be this as it may, no word as to the accuracy or otherwise of these rumours ever escaped her lips. To the world at large she was the seamstress, Alice Huron. And indeed, she plied her needle, and later on her machine, with exemplary vigour. Prices were good in those days for money was plentiful. Her professional earnings, accordingly, would have justified a far more ambitious manner of life than

that she chose to follow. But perhaps this restraint, indicating a certain delicacy of sentiment, only increased her popularity, for she was liked by all, from the prosperous storekeeper to the lowliest miner, and no merry-making was complete without her presence.

'But while time indeed had transformed the young girl, who some years before had, in all the enthusiasm of youth, thrown herself heart and soul into the fight between man and nature, from a pauper (or something approaching it) into a person of comparative opulence, it had also wrought other changes—changes more integral though less apparent. She had come on the field impressionable and enthusiastic, and now that the future seemed full of promise, instead of lying shrouded in mystery and doubt, those qualities had also taken a definite turn. She had, in short, become ambitious. In the atmosphere in which she lived, ambition had only one mode of expression—that mode was wealth. This, to some

extent, accounted for her speculations, for, misled by the dash and brag of the little world around her (most of which had shares at least to sell, if not claims or prerogatives), she had in truth invested her savings largely in mining enterprise. And not altogether unwisely as things went, for the "boom" was in full swing and still growing, so that by careful and speedy liquidation she might find herself in possession of far more money than that which she had risked. Like, however, most early comers she had faith in the field, and mistook the inflated figures of gamblers for a true estimate of its future. The turn, which, always trustful, she regarded as a merely temporary fluctuation, accordingly caught her still a holder. Having once seen great profits, moreover, she was unwilling to sell for less, and so she clung on while day by day prices diminished. Had this been the only effect of the fall, my story might never have been told, but with the decline of confidence in Melbourne and

Hobart, monetary supplies fell off, and the reward of labour diminished. Thus she suddenly found herself with reduced resources and a large number of speculative investments clamorous of support in the matter of calls on her hands; and with this, all her newborn ambition.

'Alice Huron, I have said, was fair to look on. Her daintily-coloured face, surmounted by clustering dark brown hair, was hallmarked with an expression of sterling goodfellowship, and men trusted in her broad generous brows and wide-set soft eyes as on a staff. For the rest, her nose, at once both delicate and free in line, and her mouth, fashioned into a perpetual little contemptuous pout, expressed all sorts of things to all sorts of people. She was now of that age when the female human figure is at its best, neither immaturely supple nor over-weighted with superfluous flesh; and as a specimen of physical human development, few might surpass her. Standing five feet eight, and

usually dressed in quiet close-fitting garments, she was one of those women whom men, under no circumstances whatever, pass without awakened interest. But while open-hearted in her manner with all, few possessed any real share of her confidence, though, if such existed, they were to be found entirely among the little group of "foreigners" who had, for one reason or other, decided to try their fortunes on Zeehan. Some of these "foreigners" came from Australia, others from New Zealand and the Cape, a few even from England. How far any of them had aroused in her any deep feeling I do not know—most probably none, though the gossip of the camp persistently associated her name with one Simon Clare, a pleasant-mannered speculator from South Africa, who was frequently in her company after the free and easy fashion of the field. There was no doubt that Clare was in no humour to discourage this gossip, and being what men call "a rattling good fellow" the association, at any rate, suited her

purpose. Such was the position of affairs when a man whom Clare employed as a prospector came in one evening to see his employer. The two were closeted in Clare's rooms at a hotel in the lower part of the township, and rumour was soon busy circulating the news that an extremely rich find of silver-bearing "gossan" had been made up in the mountains, so rich and extensive indeed that it would pay to "pack" it down right away.

'What happened between Clare and Simonds (the prospector) will never be exactly known, but about ten o'clock that night the two came down to the bar—Clare hot and excited, Simonds (who was tall and cadaverous-looking) with set mouth and jaunty step—and each in turn solemnly shouted" drinks for all present. Then everyone knew something was in the air, and that this hospitality indicated, if it did not seal, some understanding arrived at between the two men.

'The next day application was made to the warden, on behalf of Simonds and Clare, for a lease some miles beyond Mount Dundas, and the community shrewdly surmised that Simonds had refused to disclose the whereabouts of his find without substantial partnership in it.

'Some time after these events, the "boys," as the ruling set of men called themselves, organised a dance. It took place in a large galvanised structure with a stage at one end, dignified by the name of the "hall." The hall had been tastefully decorated for the occasion with bunting and boughs, behind which I passed a pleasant enough time listening to the music.

'Among the guests on this occasion were, of course, Clare and Alice Huron—he conventionally dressed in black, she in steel-blue silk and lace. The contrast between the rich fabric and the pale beauty of her face, the symmetry of neck and arms, riveted all regards. Within a few moments of her

arrival she had given away more engagements than could have been fulfilled in a week of solid dancing. Men wrote their names three and four deep on her programme, and others again recorded theirs over those of their predecessors. It promised badly for later on when rival claims came to be adjusted. Among the revellers were many persons well known in the district, and not least among these was Simonds, Clare's former servant and present partner. The claim he had been instrumental in opening up had more than exceeded expectations, and Simonds now found himself a person of considerable social importance. Being a man of a certain education, the part he was thus called upon to play suited him in many ways. It is important to understand that the Simonds and Clare claim lay some two days travel from Zeehan, and being exceptionally rich, there had been no occasion to employ much labour—indeed the policy of secrecy the partners were pursuing pending

development rendered it desirable on that account also to keep curious eyes from the workings. They accordingly employed but one labourer, an old and reliable servant of Clare's whom he had transferred from another property in the neighbourhood. These three, the partners and this labourer, were practically working the mine. On the present occasion it was left in charge of the old man who acted watch-dog during the owners' absence.

'The dance proceeded with whole-hearted zest—indeed there was nothing to distinguish it from any other similar entertainment till nearly midnight, when the tenth item on the programme was about to begin. It was a waltz, and both Clare and Simonds approached at the same moment to lay claim to Alice Huron's hand. Till they met at her side they did not perceive one another. Several persons were watching the incident—men who had put their names down for the same dance, but seeing who were among the claimants, had discreetly held back.

'"I cannot dance with both you gentlemen," she smilingly said. "Who first wrote his name?" Thereupon, taking up her card, she endeavoured to decipher from out the intricate maze of pencilling with whom rested priority.

'Of course it was impossible.

'Clare was about to retire, when the forced partnership into which he had been secretly obliged to enter crossed his mind. Here was the same man publicly interfering between Alice Huron and himself. "I'm cursed if I will," he muttered; and forcing a smile, he turned to Simonds, remarking that the dance had been promised him before entering the hall.

'With quick perception the woman saw that Simonds was annoyed. Unknown to Clare, she had of late been cultivating his acquaintance. It was not a difficult matter, for the joint ownership of the mine and the richness of the ore had necessitated the constant presence of one of the partners when-

ever the other was absent in the settlement—an arrangement which further recommended itself by fitting admirably in with their rule of not going below together on the same shift. They accordingly visited Zeehan turn and turn about, and Alice Huron had a free hand. Nor had trouble heretofore arisen between the two men on this account, since the somewhat guarded intercourse, dictated no less by their difference in standing than by the circumstances of their partnership, entirely precluded any interchange of personal confidence between them. Alice Huron, indeed, thoroughly conversant with Clare's ideas, had also reckoned on this fact, and had not hesitated to give Simonds the impression that her preference leaned towards him, and that feelings of mere friendship existed between herself and his partner, whatever the gossip of the settlement might assert to the contrary. It will therefore be readily understood that he was in no mood to yield place to Clare.

'While the two men were thus suddenly confronted with fresh complications in their relationship, the woman, with feminine wit, was the first to recognise an approaching crisis. She looked from one to the other, and as it would almost seem, read their respective emotions before they had time to act upon them. She foresaw all the dangers of an open breach between the two partners. A feud publicly proclaimed, with its train of competitive skirmishes, would, in the long run, undoubtedly work her harm. In the last resort, she would be obliged to declare herself in favour of one side or the other. Public opinion would leave her no alternative. Thus committed, the mine, after all, might not pour its wealth into her lap. At this moment an inspiration came upon her. She would use their passions before they had time to recognise them. She would guide their conduct to her own purposes, forcing their hands.

'"Come, come," she said, "there must be no quarrelling;" and before either could assent

to or repudiate the suggestion, turning with sunny, inconsequent laugh from one to the other, she added, "There are dice in the room behind the platform: I saw them as I left my cloak. Supposing you throw for it."

'How well she had gauged the situation, probably not even she herself at the moment recognised. She had spoken sufficiently loud to be overheard: the bystanders grew interested. The proposal was quite in keeping with the traditions of the community.

'"Throw for it?" replied Clare, annoyed that what he had hitherto regarded as a right should now be openly submitted to the arbitrament of chance, and that, too, for the benefit of a man to whom he had been so recently obliged, at his own expense, to give, as he called it, a "leg up." For it was curious to observe that the more valuable the mine became, the more this idea preyed upon him. Had it petered out, proved a rank "duffer," he would have thought no more of the incident; but as it was——

'"Throw for it?" he repeated, turning the words mentally over, and growing more and more indignant in the process. "If I throw, I throw for higher stakes than a dance."

'"Hear, hear!" murmured the bystanders, fanning the flame in order not to spoil what promised to be a most edifying quarrel.

'Alice Huron looked hurt and disappointed. A faint blush mantled her cheeks and neck. Never had she seemed more stately and beautiful than at that moment. One or two men, possessing finer sensibilities than the rest, inwardly began to look at matters from her supposed point of view. She was popular among them, this beautiful creature. They owed her, besides, a debt of gratitude for the old days when she had stood shoulder to shoulder with them in hardship, and when they had learnt something of resourcefulness, of patience, even of pluck, by her example. Last of all, she was a woman. Whatever the rivalry between Clare and Simonds might be, no man ought publicly to slight a woman,

such a woman, even incidentally. They felt inclined to remonstrate ; they would, if it went further.

'Most manful dupes! It would sometimes seem that chivalry is the measure of a blunt understanding. Alice Huron did not blush by reason of any slight. She had noticed none—that I will vouch for. She glowed with triumph because she had met with unlooked-for success, because she had felt her power, her ability in the tortuous game she had set herself to play. For Alice Huron was ambitious, and her speculations were coming back upon her, consuming her substance. Nothing but great wealth might save her, and this she had set herself to attain. Let the difference between Clare and Simonds now result as it would, she must win. No, indeed, they certainly should not throw for so small a thing as a dance with a woman. But it was a hard struggle for her brain to withstand the sudden rush of the rebellious, triumphing blood. Alice Huron, fortunately for her

plans, however, was more brain than blood, and lived in a community quite oppositely constituted.

'" Hear, hear!" murmured the bystanders; and one of them, seeing Simonds failed immediately to respond, remarked that he "didn't seem game for anything fair and square." You must remember that Clare was exceedingly popular, that all of those present believed in his phenomenal luck, which among men is the virtue of virtues, and that the mystery of the partnership was, in the absence of any definite knowledge, construed entirely in his favour. Simonds, on the other hand, attracted and flattered by what he interpreted as Alice Huron's sudden public recognition of his claims on her regard was stung by the comment, and looked angrily round.

'" Who said that?" he asked. " I am willing to throw anyone for anything on agreed terms."

'The bystanders drew closer.

'"O! please do not quarrel," entreated Alice Huron. "I wish, indeed, I had never suggested anything of the kind." But to herself she admitted that events were unerringly hastening to the desired end. She was too well acquainted with the opinions and prejudices of the field not to know that in that circle such a topic once broached could have only one issue. It was an absolute certainty that from one quarter or another what she desired would be proposed. Patience, patience . . . .!

'She had not long to wait.

'"Throw for your bank balances," suggested one of the spectators, by way of helping matters along.

'"No!" shouted another voice from the back over the heads of those in front, and no doubt taking advantage of its obscurity; "Throw him for your partnership, Simonds." There was an accent on the word "partnership."

'Clare looked at Simonds; and Simonds,

conscious of his gaze, and interpreting it in the light of a challenge, returned it.

'"I'll make it level," said Clare, with meaning, for his blood was up.

'"For the claim then," replied Simonds, in a singularly quiet tone; "ore broken down and at grass, of course, excepted."

'"Agreed."

'"And the winner has the dance," put in Alice Huron, with so perfect an assumption of womanly inconsequence, that all, even the two principals themselves, laughed.

'"Good business," exclaimed one of the by-standers amid the general buzz of excitement. The interest by this time had become universal, and men and women on the outskirts of the throng were asking and explaining the situation. The music had stopped for there were no dancers, and the musicians could see by the concourse that something unusual was on foot.

'Presently the crowd opened, and Clare stepped out, followed closely by Simonds.

'"Well, you will find me here when you come back," said Alice Huron, as they moved away. A minute later, and she was standing alone against a red flag that hung on the wall behind her, masking the simple structure of the building and theatrically setting off her superb carriage and figure. She toyed with the frond of a tree-fern that stretched in a graceful curve above her head, but her eyes followed the retreating throng with eager interest.

'"How the 'boys' play into one's hands," she thought. "Give them a lead and off they are. . . . Well, what odds? I like one as much as the other, though that doesn't mean a great deal, but I'm *sure* I shall love the winner." She laughed to herself at the thought—a strange, half-stifled, high-pitched laugh that no man on the field had ever heard in his life. But Alice Huron was, as I have said before, ambitious, and that also no man knew. "Pah!" she continued, "I mean to marry the richest mine on the West

Coast; no vulgar fractions for me, thank you!"

'Meanwhile the throng had made its way on to the platform where the human swarm completely obscured the brightly-lit table covered with refreshments. It was an unconscious stage-picture, and the more attractive by reason of its spontaneity.

'Alice Huron watched from across the parquet (gleaming, under its dressing of tallow and sawdust, and the exertions of the dancers, and reflecting the rows of lamps that amid greenery and bunting swung from the rafters). "I wonder how many of them know that I am about to be cast for?" she mused; and then she laughed again.

'Presently there came a hush—not a mere silence, but a living conscious hush such as one hears in great debates when orators are speaking. And in the void she heard the rattle of the dice. Her heart, even *her* heart, gave a throb when she thought of the destinies involved in the fall of those little

ivory cubes; but she remained, nevertheless, in that remote corner of the hall.

'All the heads yonder are craning over the table, every eye riveted on the chief actors. Listen! Again! . . . Which threw that time? A gasp escapes the crowd on the stage, but they do not break away. The dice, so far, have refused to part with their secret. The people lean forward once more in a compact mass. A breathless pause, and again the ominous rattle. Ah! a buzz of suppressed comment, but quickly quelled. A further interval, and then a burst of cheering. Such cheering! The crowd divides in excited groups, and the musicians, who have been watching this unexpected item in the entertainment, leap down to resume their task. Clare descends, looking pleased at his success, overwhelmed by congratulations, and advances across the floor amid a dense throng of admirers and believers in his luck. As he frees himself of them, the orchestra strikes up a brilliant waltz by Strauss. His glance pre-

cedes him to where Alice Huron stands before the red flag. What a vision! Nay, what a prize! He is resolved. The mine is at length his own, she also shall be his . . . .

'What happened to Simonds immediately after this scene I do not know. Probably no one does, for he disappeared both in person and also from out the minds of those present. Clare accordingly had for the rest of the evening the field to himself, and they were many who envied him and the favour in which he stood with that goddess of Chance whom all there worshipped.

'A few days later, however, it became clear that Simonds had not recognised in their entirety the consequences of his misfortune. Happening one morning to meet Alice Huron in the main street, he who till then had consoled himself for his temporal losses by the thought of her sympathy, stopped to speak a few words. To his surprise she did not show that eagerness of welcome he thought was rightly his due, and certainly no word of

sympathy, no reference to his calamity except the lightest, escaped her. But even then the truth did not dawn on him. He was so anxious to excuse her to himself that he strengthened his self-deception. Again at a shooting match held shortly after, where he scored a considerable victory, although she was present, she made no advance to sweeten his success. But his mind was still ready with excuses. The demonstrations of affection which on his recent visits to the township she had made him, were, to his simpler nature, so overwhelming a source of satisfaction that their memory outweighed all other impressions. And besides he had ground to recover before he was ready for her, so that he was averse to precipitating matters by seeking to define his position. But his awakening was not far off. One day he chanced to encounter her as Clare was also approaching, and although as first comer he had claims on her regard, she deliberately turned away from him towards his rival, so that he was obliged to pass on.

The incident occurred in a public place and was observed, as most things in such districts are, by several persons. Now the concerns of Alice Huron had not for some months past escaped the watchful eyes of the town gossips, and this last affair, duly elaborated, gave a pronounced impetus to their fuller discussion. Opinion had at length become divided as to the merits of the two men, for Simonds had won a good deal of admiration by the philosophic manner in which he had accepted the sudden reversal of his fortunes; while more analytical minds had, in view of recent developments, discovered a certain impropriety in the behaviour of Alice Huron, and in the manner in which she had alternately favoured the two men. Alice Huron, indeed, in the eagerness of her quest, had strengthened this opinion by the forfeiture of some of her popularity, many justly complaining that in her new character she was no longer the comrade of all of them that she used to be. What more natural than that Simonds, in

the confidence of a social evening over the pipes and the grog, should hear some of these views more or less openly expressed? His first impulse was to defend the absent woman, but his tongue clave when he viewed recent events in the new light thus shed on them. There were other things also of which he alone knew. Yes, fool that he had been! Tricked, as in a manner he also had tricked Clare, when he listened to her soft cooings on those frequent visits to the township, of course she had thrown him over. That was clear as daylight. Well, perhaps it was for the best; who could say? Nevertheless he did not utter these thoughts, only sat brooding there, going listlessly over his hand the while, till the other players called his attention to the game.

'Meanwhile Alice Huron discovered that with Clare's improved prospects, and under the influence of her artifices, he had developed into a full-blown, if jealous, lover—a discovery which confirmed her in her resolution to complete the estrangement between the two

men. If ever he heard of her friendship with Simonds! It was not to be thought of; at all hazards she must prevent it. To a clever woman such as Alice Huron a plan of this character was no sooner designed than carried into effect. Indeed, there was little need for her active interference since the passion of Clare was well matched by the disgust of Simonds and occasions, in the intimate life of the camp, were not wanting, in which, to their reciprocal irritation and annoyance, these conflicting attitudes became publicly apparent. Not that Simonds showed his feelings by any direct speech or action, but by a complete absence of interest in all that concerned the woman—a position now largely intelligible to, and sympathised in by, a considerable portion of the community.

'The disposal of the ore which had been excluded from the wager, however, prevented an open breach between them. This ore had originally been reserved, partly because it represented hard work successfully accom-

plished, and partly from a tacit recognition of a spirit of prudence, so that the loser might have some little means whereby to help to retrieve his fortunes. But for this, Alice Huron would have gained her end physically as well as mentally. As it was, she had to be content with the effective barrier of these opposite sentiments.

'There is no need for me to relate the march of events during the immediate future of these happenings. You know quite enough to build up in fancy a picture of the smooth course of this untrue love—the whisperings and gossipings; later on the announcement and congratulations. One morning the wedding day arrived, taking every one by surprise, so intense had been the interest of the community. The little iron church beyond the cutting had been gaily decorated with unpretending art for the ceremony, and many of the stores and offices were closed, the better to permit their owners to holiday-make. Even at so early an hour as sunrise there was

unusual stir and display of Sunday clothing in the street. Overhead, serene and smiling in the golden light, the giant brow of Zeehan towered into the faint blue, and round about the melting fog rolled seaward down the valleys, thankful for its night's lodging.

'After the hotels, that is to say after the larger portion of the population, had breakfasted, quite an unusual traffic filled the street.

'The day wore on. From all the outlying districts, fossicker and hatter, mine-officer and miner, poured in. The bars plied a tremendous trade, and more health was toasted than the prospective couple could hope to enjoy in their united span of being. Either by some preconcerted arrangement or through the famed "Luck of Clare," as it was commonly called, even the waggons, lumbering under their weight of bagged galena, and floundering over the ruggednesses or through the pitfalls of the blinded corduroy, failed by reason of absence to lend an air of sobriety

to the scene. It was Clare's wedding day, and all the works of Man were laid aside. Some have it to this hour that even the rattle of the engines and the everlasting reciprocal motion of the wheels on the poppet-heads ceased for miles around, but in my opinion, these believers are imaginative persons of small mental calibre. At length the fateful hour drew near. The bride for some time had been closeted in her shingle-roofed house with a few of her female neighbours, who, in common parlance, were styled her friends. A considerable assemblage had collected outside, consisting chiefly, if not entirely, of the uninvited. Presently the township omnibus drove up—a solid but antiquated contrivance for the discomfiture of Man. On the box sat a burly driver with a huge bouquet of those white blossoms for which these mountains are so famous. The crowd cheered on its arrival, and looked expectant. From time to time faces were to be seen at the windows, and the white dresses

of the party excited much interest. But the bride did not appear though the hour for the ceremony came and went. She was, indeed, waiting for news of the groom's arrival. At a late hour on the previous evening she had received a message from Clare, dispatched the day before, to the effect that he was endeavouring to raise and pack the broken-down mineral in the mine before the wedding, so as to be quit of his former mate once and for all. He had said that he would time his arrival so as to reach the camp an hour before the ceremony. The company were now growing as anxious as the crowd without was getting curious, when of a sudden there was a stir on the skirts of the throng, which by some instinctive action at once made a lane to the doorway. The old man who worked on the Clare claim appeared hot and breathless, and passed immediately down it into Alice Huron's presence.

'"The mine?" he gasped; "the mine is flooded, and the water was still gaining in

the shaft when I left. It must have broken through the face. . . . Mr Clare is below with Mr Simonds."

'The faces of his auditors reflected the blankest horror, which was only partly mitigated, when, in answer to questions, the messenger gave them to understand that the only hope for the two men lay in their clambering up into some of the workings, which at certain points were within fifteen feet of the surface. His words were broken by the exclamations of those present. Alice Huron alone maintained her composure.

'"What is to be done?" she inquired.

'"We must sink upon the workings. The country is easy, and thirty hours might rescue them if they are there. It's all this fixing up of the partnership," he added. "While they were mates, they never went below together. Now they are both caught . . . perhaps dead."

'The old man's words sank deep into the minds of all. Alice Huron felt self-conscious.

Meanwhile the news spread quickly, and many willing hands were instantly on offer. Within twenty minutes a party had started, all in their best clothes, for they allowed themselves no delay. They bestrode the seven or eight saddle-horses then boasted of by Zeehan.

'Alice Huron, quickly changing her dress, announced a determination to walk to the scene of the calamity. The horses were all wanted for the workers. She started shortly afterwards, accompanied by a goodly company whose interest was too great for words, and could therefore only be expressed by action. Many of these left with the white favours still in their coats, but one by one such emblems disappeared. The claim was considered to be a full two-days' travel on foot; but horsemen might reach it in sixteen hours, the hardy bush horses requiring, at a pinch, no rest during that period. The old miner, indeed, had ridden in on Clare's pony in fourteen hours, but that was chiefly down hill.

'At nightfall the pedestrians were several leagues beyond Dundas. They stopped where a rude shed had been erected near some deserted workings. Everyone lay down supperless to rest just as he was. Alice Huron slept in a portion screened off by a hastily thrown-up fence of greenery. When they awoke they found some thoughtful people had come up during the night with rations, of which they hurriedly partook. All the next day was spent in travel, the succeeding night being passed in the open under some rough bough-sheds. It was luckily both fine and warm. On the third day they arrived—Alice Huron, footsore, but uncomplaining, all eager for information. They were met half a mile from the claim by the old miner who had been on the watch for their coming. The ground, it appeared, had proved less kind than he had anticipated, but they were now nearly through. No water had been met with, and they entertained revived hopes—if only the imprisoned men had

been able to withstand the mental and physical strain! The news made the party quicken their pace, Alice Huron being amongst the first. There was no mistaking the way, a narrow track alone giving access through the dense, green, dripping bush. At length they saw the clearing high up on the mountain side ahead of them, and a few more minutes of stiff climbing brought them to the primitive surface works—merely an awning over the winze and shaft, a hut for shelter, and a rough fluming serving to divert the course of a brook hard by, and to carry off the surface water from the neighbourhood of the operations. The old miner led the way past these tokens of civilisation to a spot about forty yards further on. When they drew near, they saw between the trees several men at work. It was the relief party: their horses stood tethered to surrounding trees.

'"Well," cried their guide; "any news?"

'"Nearly through now: the ground sounds hollow."

'The travellers hung back while Alice Huron approached to the brink of the workings. Several men were below, busy at work with pick and shovel. It had not been considered safe to employ dynamite. Others on top were hauling up the buckets of rock and lowering empty ones. Alice Huron stood a moment on the brink regarding them. They were all known to her.

'"How long before you are through, Tom?" she asked one of the workers.

'"Any moment now," he replied.

'"No water as yet?"

'"Not a drop."

'There was a certain intensity in the laconic phrases.

'Of a sudden one of the men below uttered an exclamation. They were indeed through. Those on the surface gathered round. It was an unforgettable scene, acted as it was in the midst of that immemorial forest. The opening was rapidly enlarged, and one of the workers, secured by means of a rope round

his waist, crept through. The rest suspended their labours. Then there was silence, save for the sawing of the straining rope against the side of the hole. A faint cry, and some communication to those above from the explorer. He required another rope. It was lowered. Again a prolonged pause, then the words, "haul away." The end of the rope was passed up to willing hands above on the surface, as the strain was too great for those below to manage by themselves.

'At last! The men at the bottom of the workings cluster round the opening, and slowly draw something out. To those above there seems an incomprehensible delay, but it is cramped and dark down there, and they can distinguish little.

'Presently, after ages, the chief labour appears over, and the men below, till then absorbed in their task, look up and prepare to climb out. They are besieged with questions as they ascend. "Both dead, both dead," they reply. A shudder passes through

the little group. Though death is ever so near to each member of it, he still wears an unfamiliar face.

'As the pit is cleared, those at the edge perceive the two dead dripping forms, and the difficulty attending their recovery is explained. For the two dead men—rivals, if not enemies, in life—are friends in death. Their right hands are joined in an icy indissoluble clasp.

'Alice Huron pales, and well she may, for had she not, by causing the breach between the two men for her own selfish ends, sacrificed their two lives? But for their eagerness to wind up their connection, usual precautions would not have been abandoned. Who had caused that eagerness, that want of prudence?—who but Alice Huron herself, led by her mad ambition?

'And now, what is the outcome? What but this, that the mine and its revenues pass, after all, into other hands than hers. Thus Alice Huron pales, and all are awed, for the

handclasp of the two rivals bears only one interpretation, and the spirit of comradeship cries from the dead to the living. They know plainer than tongue can tell that in that supreme moment, amid the rush of the waters and the falling debris, comradeship triumphed over worldly jealousies, even over the grave itself. And perchance those two poor sodden things learnt the truth with dying gasps.

'What more can be added? Of all the company that attended Alice Huron to the scene of this tragedy, this tragedy—if I may so style it—of pick and shovel, not one, save for the sake of charity, would attend her return, for the secrets of the tomb surrounded her being and blighted her existence.'

V.

Death Dances in the Bush.

'You must not think,' said Uncle Stretcher the following evening, 'that men have it always all their own way in this world. It is true that, possessed of arms and hands, they are for the time being more powerful than are we snakes; but occasions nevertheless arise on which they also feel the pinch of a superior force. You have wondered, so your mother tells me (here Widow Scaley perked up her little head) how individuals so opposite in attributes as my man-baby and Alice Huron could belong to the same species, and I must candidly admit it was not accidentally that I placed them side by side. But I had no

desire to puzzle you, rather was it to show what variations are possible among men. Age, sex, surroundings, heredity, all so many contributing causes to the wonderful variety of humanity. I, of course, want you to understand Man, not to grow perplexed over him, so, if you will wipe out from your minds for the time being, all memory of what has gone before, I will tell you of an incident I witnessed several years ago not far from here, in which Man was by no means the arbiter of his own fate. And you, Wriggle, will please not to interrupt so much as you did last night.' Wriggle, at these words, coiled up like a watch spring, resolved, at all costs, to preserve his reputation for good behaviour with his uncle.

'It was on the Henty, a river that winds a tortuous course through the densest bush of this island down to the yellow sands and broad banks of its estuary. At this point there is now a ferry, but between the sea and the ranges that give the river birth, at the

time I am speaking of, no human settlement existed.

'I had taken up my summer quarters a good twenty miles inland on the banks of this river, for the sake of the climate, which is much appreciated by frogs. One evening, about sundown I was lying dozing by an old and decayed blackwood trunk, when I heard a footfall, and sure enough almost immediately afterwards a man stepped into the small clearing by the water's edge, hard by where I lay.

'He was a sturdy fellow of middle age, but in spite of his fine build he threw down his "swag" and billy with a groan, and I could see by his carriage that he was very weak, and that he welcomed the riddance. Then for the space of several minutes he looked earnestly down the stream, watching the glow of sunset above the dark coigns of the forest, after which, turning round with a sigh, he muttered, as if by way of comfort,

'"Sundown! he will be here directly . . . . directly."

'At these words I wondered; for I could not think whom he expected in so remote and unknown a region, and I thought he must be out of his mind to entertain such an idea in such a place, so I watched him carefully, for my curiosity was aroused.

'First of all he cast about him in the clearing, as though he were in search of some lost thing; but afterwards, gathering himself together, he picked up several pieces of tinder and brushwood which he placed in a heap in the centre. There was not much deadwood about, so that as he exhausted that ready to hand he wandered further and further afield in search of more, returning laden every now and again. Presently he struck a match and set the whole pile ablaze, whereafter he descended to the water's edge to fill his billy; and, stepping carefully back, laid it in the midst of the fire on a bed of settled embers. Then, wearied by the exer-

tion, he stood for a while watching the vessel heat, and I saw by the flickering light of the fire that his face was wan and pale, and that there was a fierce look in his sunk dark eyes.

'"Well," he muttered, "when he comes he'll find all ready, or my name's not Joe;" and so saying he plunged again into the bush in search of more fuel.

'Now although it was by no means a cold night the warmth of the fire quickened me extremely, so that what happened afterwards I am able to swear to, though very few will believe me; and indeed I can hardly expect it, for the incident was so remarkable that I think no snake, let alone a man, could hope to witness so strange a spectacle again in one span of life.

'I had just time to glide round the fire. (A curious thing a fire, Wriggle; it bites with its tongue, and it is all tongues). I say I had just time to glide round the fire when I felt the ground quiver slightly, so I scuttled away that the man Joe should not find me

and kill me. I was none too soon as it happened, for when I was again safely in hiding I looked out and saw him leaning over the fire examining the pot.

'"Whoever would have thought it!" he exclaimed, but in a voice so different to the one I had previously heard that I knew at once I was mistaken, and that it was not the man Joe at all who spoke. "Who would have thought it! I am in luck's way," he said, and then, moving round to the other side he stood almost facing me. He was a tall, fair creature, and, dressed in a "bluey," which is a sort of flannel smock frock, he looked taller and fairer even than he really was. He also seemed far younger than the other man, being perhaps a matter of twenty years old. In his hand he held a "swag," which he presently threw down beside that of Joe. Then he crouched up to the fire, rubbing his hands and swinging his arms across his breast to stir the sluggish blood. While he was so doing, Joe returned with an armful of fuel,

and, seeing the stranger, stopped, but only for a moment, for he came forward and threw a log on the fire, making the sparks fly in every direction. The stranger at this looked up and the men's eyes met. I think I shall never forget that look: it was so full of enquiry, and withal so helpless.

'"Saw you!" said Joe (for he was the first to speak), "Saw you 'bout noon to-day." The crackle of the fresh log almost drowned his utterance, but with my straining heated faculties, I heard every word of the broken sentences. "Saw you . . . . top of the range . . . . making tracks for here. So, says I, he'll spell on the Henty, he will, or I'm mighty mistaken. I'll strike out to meet him." There was a dead silence, the younger man still waiting for more information. "So I struck out for here . . . . quick as thought, and lit this yer fire. . . . Any tucker?"

'"No," quietly replied the young man, "and you?"

'"None," answered Joe.

'"Not! . . . How about the billy?"

'"Thought you would have some of course," replied Joe, "and wanted to save time."

'"My!" The young fellow sank back completely overcome.

'"New chum?" enquired Joe after a while.

'"Me? No!" (Emphatically and with disgust).

'"Thought you was, you take it so to heart. Anyway if you had been on the wallaby long as I have, you'd know this yer bush won't feed you."

'"And you?" said the young man.

'"I? I don't count; I've lost my luck."

'"I see; what are we to do?"

'"Do? Why do without to be sure. Hot water all round; belts in a couple o' holes; pipes, singsong, bed. Wake up like sheep with a devil in the paddock." He spoke in a half jocular, half ironical tone which puzzled the young fellow. But it acted like a tonic on his nerve.

'"Come," said he, "Let us carry out your

programme, and to-morrow, with luck, we may find relief.

'"Ah, *with luck*," echoed Joe reflectively. Then quickly facing round, he added, "Anyway, it's your turn to keep the fire in!" The young man accordingly set out to hunt for wood and it was not long before a goodly pile lay stacked against the log in which I was hidden. Meanwhile Joe had opened his "swag," and had taken therefrom a pannikin which he filled from the steaming billy. The hot liquid seemed to revive him, for, taking out his pipe, he lit it at an ember, and, wrapped in a rough blanket, lay down beside the blaze. A few minutes later the young man did the same.

'"Advise you," said Joe, to take in a hole or so before you drop off. Baccy's food, but it ain't bulk, and my experience is belt before baccy.

'The young man acted up to the suggestion. "By the way," he said, "in your receipt, singsong comes before bed."

'"Leave that to you," said Joe, "I ain't tasted food for two days. You wouldn't talk like that if you had'nt."

'The young man felt he owed Joe something, for the fire, for the hot water, for his company, for the advice. "Come," he said, "I'm game, what shall it be?"

'"Anything," said Joe wearily. "Try Lympus."

'"Lympus? What's that?"

'"Don't know Lympus? Well!"

'The young man felt annoyed. At any rate he would bluff "Lympus," which he rightly judged to be the vernacular for Olympus, a well known tableland in the centre of the island.

'"Here goes," he said, "for next best, The Fossicker's Toast," and in a weak though tuneful tenor he sang the following :—

Talk of hunger to the bushman! talk of drinkin' to the fish!
Why you townsfolk get as much to eat as ever man could wish,

And yer lives are spent perusin' everlastin' bills of fare
From the cradle to the graveyard. . . . But its *different* out there
When the cormorant inside yer is a-stickin' in his claws,
And its grindin' useless ivories and workin' famished jaws;
When yer have'nt had a morsel,—not the devil of a bit—
And its nothin,' nothin,' nothin' all the grub you're like to get
Till they serve it cheap and wholesome in the parson's promised Show,
Either supper with the angels,——or a pipin' grill below.
Ha, ha; Ha, ha; Ho, ho, ho!
Here's to supper with the angels,——or a pipin' grill below!

'The elder man joined in the burden, which was a curious mixture of cachination and pathos, but his voice was almost inaudible.

'"Encore," he cried weakly, at the end of the strain, "encore"! and the young man responded to the invitation with scarcely a pause.

You who stir the fire and shiver at a gust upon the pane,
You who babble of the deluge for a drop or so of rain,
You who point with awe at Wellington's white sparse besprinkled crown
Just to show that there are hardships not so very far from town.
Have you ever felt flesh stiffen in the south wind's vicious bite
When the stars are frozen solid on the meshes of the night,
And the mountains gleamin' fanglike in the winter all around
Seem to whisper: rest and comfort may in death alone be found,
Till you yearn for curse or blessin' in the parsons' promised Show,
Either summer with the angels,—or a blazing fire below?
Ha, ha; Ha, ha; Ho, ho, ho!
Here's to summer with the angels,—or a blazing fire below!

'The grim humour of the song fitted excellently in with the extremity of singer and audience, and the tenebrous theatre that re-echoed it. At its conclusion the young man fell back utterly exhausted by the effort, while

the elder one, to judge from his appearance and the fact that he neither joined in the refrain of the last verse, nor testified to its conclusion, was already asleep.

'And some time after, the fire flickered and began to smoulder.

'Now, when I also, having observed these doings, was about to coil up for the night, a sudden chill swept through the clearing, and again I looked forth. The stars were brightly shining overhead, and one could hear the murmur of the river as it rolled, stirring the tangle that littered its encumbered banks. But the branches of the trees overhead were motionless, so that I could in no wise discover whence it proceeded.

'But while I was yet looking, I perceived a strange sight. Surely a hallucination wrought of fitful shadows and smoke and darkness? But no, it moved: and then, from the blackness, a Figure silently unfolded Itself, yet of a growth so subtle that no origin to Its being might be determined.

'At length the Figure became fully apparent, standing shrouded in a black cloak, and wearing a cap that hung tilted in heavy folds over Its countenance, before the now dying embers, which It steadfastly regarded. And I could see It was pale and of shrunk mien, with hollow eyes and gleaming teeth, mocking the beauty of man. Then I knew I was in the presence of the great Destroyer, the Awful One, whom men call Death, and I trembled though I knew not why.

'For some minutes He stood silently regarding the embers, toying the smouldering logs unflinchingly with bony feet, and cowing the spitting flames by a gesture. Then seizing his cloak with gaunt determined fingers, He raised it knee-high, and began to dance a weird measure round the hearth, pausing bewhiles and swaying his body, in a rollicking manner, from side to side. And as He danced His bones rattled, making a rhythmic sound like the clatter of castinets, and His

jaws gaped and closed though no speech issued.

'Now this I noticed in particular: that on whichever side of the hearth the Figure happened to be, on that side also did the glow of the embers turn cold and blue, though on the opposite side they remained red and warm, and so, as the Figure pursued Its fantastic course around the fire, this change of colour followed It, just as the forest shadows give chase to the traveller's eye across the receding levels of the river. I cannot remember how long this strange spectacle continued, but it must have lasted over a considerable period until at length my eyes lost their cunning amid the gathering complexity and speed of the Figure's convolutions, and my ears grew dizzy at the rhythmic noise that accompanied them. All I now recollect is that towards the end, the rattle seemed to shape itself into words, constituting what men, I believe, call an incantation, of which the chief measure ran something after this fashion:—

Peace inherit,
Troubled spirit,
Peace immane;
Strife is useless
Death is truceless
And shall reign.

Through the ages
Dullards, sages
Sink the same.
Hopes encumber,
Death is slumber,
Life but flame.

What resisting?
I persisting
Rest draws nigh;
Quicker, quicker,
Fall and flicker,
Down, fire, die.

'And so at length the fire grew paler and weaker under the spell thus cast upon it, and finally it went out.

'Then Death stood awhile, as at the first, regarding the white ashes, to my mind almost sorrowfully, and afterwards, turning noiselessly

round, He approached the sleeping forms of the two men.

'And it grew colder.

'Now you must know that in some mysterious way, fire is kindred to life (which men explain in that it holds the legateship of the sun whence springs all being), and it was for this reason that the men showed it such attention, and also why Death saw well to it first of all that it was extinguished. But after the fire was out, the exhausted men lay at the mercy of Death. And Death stooped over them, so that the skirts of His mantle swept their bodies, and His breath was upon them. And so He remained for some space of time. I could scarcely tell in the gloom of the night, beneath the shadow of the foliage, what He did with them, but presently I saw Him rise staggering as though under the weight of a heavy burden, though I could perceive none. Either it was a heavy burden that bore Him down, or some unknowable secret too great for His endurance. And so

He went forth, across the clearing, beyond the cold hearth, down into the fastnesses of the forest, and I saw Him no more.

'But in the morning, when dawn crept cautiously through the treetops, the two companions were yet sleeping; and when the sun shone on the bivouac they slept on.

'So sleep they still. For that night they died.'

VI.

INTERLUDE.

'THE children have a particular request to make,' began Widow Scaley, the following evening when the family circle was formed, as had now become quite customary, round Uncle Stretcher.

'Well, what is it?' inquired the old snake benevolently, as, in a manner perfected by long practice, without moving either head or tail, he took a superfluous cockle out of the middle of his back.

'They say your stories have all ended so sadly of late; and, indeed, I quite agree with them. So they want to know whether you couldn't for once in a way tell them something

cheerful, and I'm sure we none of us should mind very much if you invented it.'

'*Invented it*! I never invent.'

'O *do* tell us something cheerful,' broke in Coila.

'Yes, do,' pleaded Wriggle.

'I must bow to destiny,' replied Uncle Stretcher, as a smile extended across his face; 'but pray remember, I never invent.'

'Your father and I were once lodging near a farmyard. Your father, as you may have heard, was epicurean in his tastes, and had an ineradicable objection to short commons. Poor old Scaley, if ever snake blessed his length of throat, I think I know the one. What he liked, he used to say, about a meal, was that he could taste it all down him. Ah! a meal to him *was* a meal. See him swallow rat. Beautiful! beautiful! I do declare I never saw anyone swallow rat as he did. And what honour for the rat! It was harvest-festival, junket-fair, and royal-progress all in one. I use the imperfect metaphors of men, but

they are inadequate to express the idea of Scaley swallowing rat. Rat used to walk into Scaley as naturally as down its own hole. You could see high rat-mark on Scaley's outside as plainly as men see heat on what they call a thermometer. And just before it disappeared, while its tail was still tickling his palate, Scaley would smile in utter ecstasy; such a smile welling over with content and happiness. I never saw a smile like it, so lit was it with thanksgiving that it turned the bush grey and desolate. Ah! what an ambition to provoke it! My mouth waters as I think of the heroic roll of those who have died for its sake.

'At the place I am speaking about there were rats innumerable, and Scaley was in his element; but he found that so rich a diet required a considerable quantity of milk. It was a natural and reasonable craving while Scaley stuck to the dairy, but one day the idea of direct supply came into his head. He had seen it mentioned somewhere on what

men call an advertisement-hoarding, and from this point everything seemed to go wrong. At first it was the cow who objected. Scaley negotiated her, however, by creeping up while she slept—an occupation which generally engaged her attention whenever she was not eating. The cow in this manner at length became reconciled to the new order of things, so that she looked upon Scaley as a regular customer. Thus for some days he led a very pleasant life, and, indeed, I myself often shared his simple joys.

'One morning both he and I had been about half-an-hour beside the cow, feeling, in the sunshine which streamed down upon that sheltered paddock, both happy and replete, when we were suddenly startled out of our wits by a noise hard by. How the thing, whatever it was, could have come up to us unawares, passed our understanding; but there it evidently was, though we could not see it. Of course we instantly assumed the defensive, ready for any emergency. A

thousand ideas crossed my mind, but supreme among them all stood the tower-like vigilant form of Man and his frequent and hardly less dangerous companion, dog. The same fears, to judge by his expression, must have passed through your father's mind, but affairs were too critical for any attempt at communication. We had a preconcerted plan of action in case of any unexpected interruption such as this, so that although we were both terribly alarmed, we nevertheless knew how to shape our general behaviour. That plan was to divide forces, making for the stone wall where we dwelt by different paths through the tangled growth. Before, however, either of us could put this plan into execution, the thing was upon us. A cold shiver went down my spine as I felt the ground shake and heard a terrible but asthmatic roar rend the air. I was riveted in fearful expectation. Yet can I remember your father raising his still milky head, prepared to strike at sight, and then the bending of the long grass above him, im-

mediately followed by the abrupt intrusion of a huge black body. With what ferocity did not poor Scaley fling his muscular length against it, the long lithe coils straightening out like a sapling in the effort, and how shrill and penetrating the sibilation with which he expressed his rage and terror! I remember, I say, all this; and then .... Goodness! *How* I laughed. Now, Coila, three guesses!'

'O, I can't .... A man?'

'Again.'

'Well, a tiger?'

'Once more.'

'Then a magpie?'

Uncle Stretcher shook his head and smiled.

'The children will never guess,' said Widow Scaley, to whom the circumstances were evidently familiar, 'because they have never seen one.'

'Ah! I forgot,' said their uncle. 'Well, ... your father had spent a full charge of venom *on a pig*!—just the very and only

animal that is entirely unsusceptible to its effects.'

The little snakes burst into laughter, for they, of course, knew this peculiarity of the pig by repute, though they had never yet seen that animal; and their merriment was heartily shared by their mother and uncle.

When it had subsided, Uncle Stretcher continued as follows:—

'That pig must have been basking at the back of the cow, and the cow, knowing all about it, gave no token of its presence. It was, however, a long time before I ceased to chaff your father on his adventure, and what with the sense of security this false alarm inspired, and one thing and another, we had within a day or two resumed all our old habits. I even fancied the cow was pleased when we reappeared.

'For a long time we rang the changes between milk and rats, with an occasional — a very occasional — egg. Meanwhile

summer was waning. We had indeed become so accustomed to undisturbed possession in our corner of the paddock, and were so used to the movements of the various four-footed animals—cows, horses, and sheep—which grazed there, that we no longer troubled our heads about them. It was only for Man that we kept an outlook.

'Well, one day we were basking as usual beside the cow, when I heard a sound. As a matter of routine I mentioned the circumstance to your father. He lifted his head a moment, and then resumed his listless attitude. "Only a horse," he said. So we took no further notice, though the sound was all the while approaching. Presently, when quite close, it stopped, and a noise like the report of a pistol rang out. At this both of us started up, and the cow rose on all fours. Judge of our dismay when, towering overhead, mounted on a horse, we perceived a man gazing fixedly in our direction. The horse also was nervously sniffing to wind-

ward, having doubtless, on his part, scented us. Here was a sorry plight. "Nimble's the word" said your father, promptly disappearing into the grass. I was on the point of following when a black object hurtled through the air and alighted (to my intense alarm intercepting my line of retreat) within a yard of my nose. I at once feigned to be lifeless, but when I had gathered my wits I recognised that the missile was, after all, only the man's hat, which he had cast in order to distract my attention till he could come and slay me. I don't suppose he knew my name, to try so threadbare a trick. As the man, however, was fast approaching I was unable to make a dash for the wall without exposing myself unduly, so my mind was made up. The hat was of that limp, broad-brimmed variety so common in the bush. I made straight for it, and before its owner could see me, was safely coiled beneath. So critical indeed did I consider my position that not even the rank hair-grease with which it was anointed could drive

me forth again, though its odour nearly caused me to faint.

'"Curse the beggars!" were the first words I overheard, and the stranger began to beat up the tangle all around in the hope of discovering us. But in this process, of course, he respected his own hat. "Well, I'm blessed!" he exclaimed, as he abandoned the fruitless search, "These snakes melt before your eyes." So saying, he threw down the stockwhip (which had given the first alarm) and began to mop his head.

'I felt the danger-point now fast approaching. At length it came, for of a sudden he stooped down and lifted up the hat. I shall not easily forget how he leapt back when he saw me beneath it, nor the rate at which he flew for his stockwhip. With more leisure I would have enjoyed his astonishment, but then I had else to do, and quick as lightning I glided away into the bush to rejoin your father in the wall, where for a good half-hour we listened to our enemy worry-

ing about outside, endeavouring to find us.'

Uncle Stretcher stopped.

'That's not all, is it?' asked Coila, eager to hear more.

'Yes, that's all,' replied the old snake.

'But surely something happened after that?' suggested Wriggle, with infantile insinuation.

'Well,' answered his uncle, 'in all probability a good deal *did* happen, for this is just where the *snake*-story would begin — only, you see, I don't know it.'

With which mysterious statement the young creatures had to rest content.

VII.

THE SNAKE-CHARMER.

THE following evening, Wriggle and Coila were eagerly awaiting their uncle. His stories had by this time become quite an institution in the Scaley family, and no one was more pleased than the widow at the success of her scheme for her little ones' enlightenment. But on this occasion, Uncle Stretcher was later than usual, and pleasurable excitement was beginning to give way to nervous apprehension before he appeared.

'In point of fact,' said the old snake, 'I have just heard rather an alarming rumour, which I have been detained investigating. One of those creatures who make it their

business to capture live specimens of our species is in this neighbourhood, camped some few miles south of here, and intends, so I understand, to secure a large bag before he leaves.'

Wriggle was, of course, immediately all questions to know why men sought living snakes, to which his uncle replied, that they were caught for several purposes. 'One purpose,' he said, 'is to stock collections of living animals which men keep for their pleasure near towns; another is to experiment on the nature of our venom; a third, again, is to exhibit us for gain in public. This person, in all probability, has the latter object in view. There is, however, no immediate danger, and therefore, as the subject is of current interest, I cannot perhaps do better than relate to you an experience of my own at the hands of a snake-charmer.

'I had committed a singular indiscretion, having fallen asleep on grass near a public way, with the result that I woke up to find

myself half way down a canvas bag, where the rest of my person was obliged to follow. I suffered immediate discomfort by being jolted about for hours with a tiger-snake—a perfect stranger, as well as subsequent indignity by being named Shivers at sight.

'When at length my companion and I were released, it was to be shot out of the bag into a tin box, the lid of which, being almost immediately afterwards slammed down, narrowly escaped crushing my tail. Here we remained for a day and a night in utter darkness. I was in a very bad humour indeed, and my companion in no less a degree frightened. I tried to reason with him, but to little purpose. Indeed he annoyed me exceedingly by questioning the soundness of my advice, which was to effect escape at all hazards and at the earliest opportunity. I even went so far as to point out to him that so much risk and trouble had not been incurred in order to keep us alive with the sole object of slaughtering us later on. But what service

to reason with a fool? Had he fallen in with my plans I should most certainly have escaped at a far earlier period than was the case, though possibly under less dramatic circumstances.

'The first change in our condition came as suddenly as all the incidents of this adventure. We heard footsteps: the lid of the box was abruptly lifted, a dazzling light half-blinded me, I was seized by the throat and indiscriminately lifted out.

'"Here's a fine one, Kitty!" cried my gaoler to a young and delicate-looking woman sitting at a table, pen in hand (for it was a room). "Just look at him!" He held me over his extended arm, the better to display me. I felt too dazed to offer any resistance. It was a rude, rough dwelling where I now found myself, situated (as I afterwards discovered) on the outskirts of the township of Strahan. The sheet-iron walls, covered here and there with smoke-stained pictures clipped from illustrated papers, were for the

most part, cold and bare. A tattered matting hid as decently as might be the deficiencies of the flooring, while the metal roof afforded a scant protection from either the heats of noon or the chills of night. Withal it was so venerable, that patches of sky might in places be seen through it.

'"Indeed, dear, it is," she replied, raising a pair of sad blue eyes; "but mind how you hold him. You really are too careless."

'"You ought to know by this time that I am able to care for myself as well as most."

'"I do, I do. But still . . . . O, my dear, when I ran away with you, you promised for my sake to be careful. You know, you must know, how I dread these rash acts."

'"Always the marble halls," he replied, roughly, giving me at the same time a pinch which made me long to return the compliment. "It's pretty true what they say about bred in the bone. My word!"

'"If you would only give up these snakes,"

she said, ignoring the sneer conveyed in his words, "it would make me so happy—you have no idea how happy I should be."

'"What! and ask the public to come just to listen to your singing? You must think them bigger fools even than I do."

'"You are unkind."

'"And you foolish." He put me back in the box, but as the lid was left ajar, I could still hear their voices. The tiger-snake lay coiled up in the corner. "Did they hurt you?" he asked, in chattering tones. "No," I said, curtly, for I was in no mood to open up a conversation with him. Besides, I desired to listen to what passed between our captor and the young woman.

'For some time they conversed in low tones which I could not catch, but presently the man raised his voice. "What nonsense!" he said, "you *must* sing. I'll, indeed! Do you think I hire a piano for nothing? You'll have to learn how to take the fat with the lean. Did I beg off when that brute bit me

the other day? Not a bit of it! I scored a sensation, and that's what you'll have to do."

'"But, my dear . . . . "

'"O, we'll make the usual announcement. It's bound to fetch 'em. 'In spite of Madame's indisposition' . . . . "

'"Spare me," she murmured, wearily; "spare me!—anything but that."

'"Well, then, does the bill meet with your approval?"

'"If I can sing, I will, dearest."

'"Exactly my notion; so put on your hat and run round to the hall with the rag. It won't be pasted up till night if you sit over it much longer."

'At this point the conversation ceased, and a little later our box was removed from the room, so that I heard no more.

'We were allowed to rest peacefully for a considerable time. The tiger-snake, however, proved quite wanting in intelligence, and nothing of importance passed between us. At length I grew so drowsy, that it came

quite as a surprise to feel our prison being carried along. I suppose we were nearly half-an-hour in motion before we were dropped with a startling crash upon some resonant material like the flooring of a house. Here we were allowed to remain for a further period in comparative peace, but the constant trampling of feet in the neighbourhood gave me no real ease. These sounds at length became so constant that they resembled a cataract in full descent. All at once, the strains of music mingled with, and as I conceived, quelled them. The instrument appeared to be what men style a piano, and the player was rendering some brilliant overture. As I listened, the old strange fascination crept over me. Even the tiger-snake appeared affected.

'Presently the lid of our prison was thrown back, and my captor put in his hand in such a confident manner that I was quite disarmed, though I had made up my mind to resist him. He caught hold of me by the neck, and drew

me forth. We were in a dark corner of a brilliantly lighted hall. He was in evening-dress, a glittering solitaire, like a chained planet, shooting great prismatic flashes from the centre of his shirt-front. I could not resist watching these strange fitful gleams of light. He held me up at arm's length, and gazed fixedly at me. I felt I was in his power, and that it would require all my presence of mind to avoid falling absolutely under his loathsome influence. Oh, how I hated him! The music, the light, the intense indescribable *consciousness* that a large assemblage of human beings always creates, contributed to bind me in a dream-like spell. The man's eyes swam out from beneath his black, shaggy brows, and swept the corners of my brain—he filled me with himself. I knew his unbending will was mastering me, and that as surely as the siderite compels its sister stone, my muscles were shortly destined to render it allegiance in spite of my own desires. I am not concerned to explain how

this might be, yet it would seem that achievement is the cradle of will power, which therefore attaches more to the body than to the mind. Oh, arms and legs, arms and legs, what dominion is not yours!

'The music ceasing brought me partly again to myself. There was a burst of applause, and the rattle of timber resounded through the building. Then a silence, in the midst of which I heard a man's voice.

'"The first item on our programme," it said, "is a recitation by a gentleman well known in this district. Mr Otho Bourke will kindly oblige."

'The rattle of timber was resumed, and then died away. Whereupon began a steady rise and fall of studied phrases from the lips of a person I could not see. He was relating an incident of the days when the black men had not yet fallen victims to the advance of the white men—days I myself remembered perhaps better than the speaker. But haply he was not telling his own experiences, for men

have a habit of interpreting the deeds and thoughts of others as though their own. My attention was drawn from these proceedings, however, by the arrival of the young woman I had seen earlier in the day. She was clad in white from head to foot—a simple dress, but like the blue-black of night, most fit to reveal the beauty of its mistress; for it enshrined a form and countenance lovely as the starlit heavens,—so sad, so pale, so delicate, I know no fitting comparison.

'"Oh, my dear," she said, "pray be careful with that creature."

'The man looked up beneath his shaggy brows. "You are ready for your turn?" he asked; "it comes next."

'"I know, I know. Will you give Hammond the score?" She handed him a roll of music. The man put me back in the box, but left the lid open, trusting, I suppose, to its depth for my safe custody. He undid the roll.

'"What is this?" he asked. "Fireflies? That won't do at all."

'"But really, dearest, I am so weak, I cannot do more to-night: indeed I cannot."

'"You must think of the public. What has your weakness got to do with them? There will be no need to trouble Hammond with this, Madame, he has your score already."

'"He has my score?"

'"Certainly, you are cast for the 'Wilderness,' and the 'Wilderness' is what the public is going to get."

'"Oh, I cannot! I shall break down. I feel sure I shall."

'"You will *not* break down. If . . . ."

'The young woman burst into tears. I felt I could have killed the man on the spot.

'"Oh, Charlie," she sobbed, "what have I done that you should speak to me like this? Tell me, dearest, what I have done, and I will try to be better; for you know there is nothing in this whole world I would not do for you, if only I were able."

'"Then, of course, you will sing the 'Wilderness,' said the man, with a contemptuous laugh.

'"I will try, indeed I will, Charlie, for your sake. But I fear; oh! I fear."

'The reciter had by this time finished amid uproarious applause, and hot and breathless, joined the two behind the wings. The manager, to whom I supposed the voice I had previously heard belonged, now announced that Madame Musgrove would sing her famous song, "The Great Australian Wilderness;" and the audience greeted the news with acclamation.

'The poor woman, whose eyes were yet heavy with unshed tears, cast a despairing look towards her lord, and advanced across the stage. The man, seizing hold of me, stepped to a spot, where in the shadow he could observe the performance of his victim. He appeared coldly critical, unmoved alone of all those there gathered together. No doubt with intention he kneaded me this

way and that in his hands all the time. Had he not held me firmly by the neck, I most undoubtedly should have struck him there and then, so singularly was I moved by the plight of his companion.

'She had by this time reached the footlights, and a round of applause rendered tribute to her fame and her beauty. Indeed, never have I beheld a sight more entrancing or more pitiable. The delicately rounded white form, the golden glory of her hair, the pale dream-like beauty of her countenance, lifted by the deceptive waves of glittering heat no less than by the atmosphere of enforced adulation which surrounded her, conspired to fill me with irresistible impulses. I longed to level the beam of justice, and this longing became more intense, if that was possible, when the musician, who sat in the auditorium close beneath the stage, and therefore out of my sight, struck the opening strains of the song.

'It was a sad, throbbing measure, the

melody taken in vague outline by the bass, while the treble was full of strange, thought-like chords that fitfully chimed and clashed with the predominant lilt like the straining of a vexed heart—a melody to which birds would listen in hushed rapture, and that pierced my substance like the glow of fire. The frail white form floated before my eyes, dividing like a snow-summit the tactual world around me from the mysterious shades, where human eyes and ears were bent in constrained attention. Then with a swell of song she possessed herself of her kingdom, of every brain and every bosom in that hushed assembly, and I writhed in the loathsome clutch of her tyrant.

A letter from across the seas,
A pleading word from home,
Borne by those patient argosies
That spurn the knitted foam,
It bids me back with tenderness,
Yet how can I obey?
This great Australian wilderness
Is wooing me to stay.

What dreams some lover long ago
Lisped in my childhood's ear,
With soul-exalting overflow
Awake embodied here.
And oh! the wealth of savage space,
And oh! these drifts of blue,
Where Freedom rallies heart of grace
To raise her courts anew.

Methinks an angel through the skies,
Who, haply straying down
Beyond the gates of Paradise,
Might deem this land his own.
Love quells the wilderness, and love
Doth tent the homeless weald:
How stern the suffering may prove,
By love 'tis ever healed.

'The singer could barely complete the last verse. The audience, carried away no less by the melody than by the ravishing form that bodied it forth to them, was hushed to an almost palpable silence, so that the wavering voice still rose distinct, and indeed appeared like the supreme effort of a consummate art. But I heeded not this, for I could see the frail white figure tremble and

sway against the dark, fog-like background, and I wondered at the ways of Man. The interval filled by the accompaniment gave the singer time to collect her faculties, and as it once more died away, she took up the melody with thrilling cadence:—

Thus every joy by life held dear,
That human heart can crave,
Ten thousand-fold I find them here
Beyond the restless wave.
You bid me back with tenderness,
Yet how can I obey?
This great Australian wilderness
Is wooing me to stay.

'At the conclusion, the rapturous applause that burst forth and shook the building was suddenly quelled. The shock of so abrupt a silence was not greater than that which called it forth, for the singer, curtseying in recognition, with a sad smile of acknowledgment flickering across her pale features, had fallen at the height of her triumph into a death-like swoon.

'The manager, a stout, crop-headed fellow,

stepped immediately forward and bore her to the wings, where the man, her master, rudely thrusting me back into the box, aided him to restore her to consciousness. I overheard some hurried conference, and then the voice of the manager telling the audience that Madame Musgrove had now recovered, and that the performance would proceed. The next item, he said, was Professor Musgrove's exhibition of wild snakes. Upon this, our prison was lifted bodily up; and as I was soon to discover, carried on to the stage. While passing, I heard the woman's voice in faint entreaty exclaim, "Indeed, dearest, it was not my fault;" and no sooner had I heard this than I determined, at all hazards, to avenge her. The next moment the man was speaking, addressing the audience in jaunty, coarsely familiar tones.

'"Ladies and gentlemen," he began amid applause, "I come before you to-night to give my world-renowned exhibition of the manner of handling wild snakes. There is no

deception, for you will at once recognise that the reptiles I shall have the honour of introducing to your notice are both untamed and dangerous. I use no drugs upon them, nor are their fangs extracted.

'"But first of all, I would beg of you, ladies and gentlemen, not to entertain the least anxiety for my safety, since I am furnished with an infallible remedy, compounded by myself, which counteracts the virus of the most redoubtable, the most deadly of serpents. This preparation is my secret, and small phials will be on sale to-morrow at William's store, price ten shillings each. I mention this to afford any of you who may be impressed with its value an opportunity of obtaining a supply. The elixir is a specific composed of the strongest antidotes known to Man, gathered from all parts of the world, and combined in proportions and by methods known only to myself and after countless experiments. To give you an idea of the complex nature of this valuable preparation, I may just

instance, before passing on to the practical portion of my entertainment, that among other ingredients, it contains infusions of the snake-plant from Eubœa, an island off the east coast of Greece; of the snake root (*Senagæ radix*), so successful as an antidote for rattle-snake bite in North America; and of Brazilian wood, held of old to be an absolute panacea against the bites of all serpents; together with ammonia and other powerful drugs. It is applied both internally and externally, but full directions are to be found on every phial.

'"The snakes I have with me to-night are ten in number, of which two were caught only yesterday. To begin with, I propose to show you how sensible to music is the whip-snake, a reptile frequently found on the button grass swamps in this neighbourhood, curled among the tussocks. I have here four whip-snakes, lively little fellows as you will observe. I place them on this table. Music, please."

'The sound of the piano arose, soothing my excited feelings, for you may well imagine how critical I felt the time to be. A great clapping of hands, however, soon aroused me from my fool's paradise, and when it had ceased, the Professor, as he was styled by his manager, continued:—

'"The next item on my programme is the handling of absolutely wild serpents caught yesterday. I would beg of you to believe, ladies and gentlemen, that there is no deception. If any of you are in doubt, I will hand them round for inspection with the greatest pleasure."

'At this there was sensation, and some of the women in the audience screamed. Meanwhile the man opened the box containing my companion and myself. He dived his hand in and seized me, as before, while yet dazed with the light. Little did he know the resolution to which I had come since the morning, and which each moment was aggravating, else perhaps he might have left me in

peace. With his other hand he grasped the tiger-snake. Both of us immediately threw a coil round his person—I round his neck, my fellow-victim round his arm. There was a murmur of repugnance from the body of the hall, as though the audience and not their entertainer felt the touch of our cold bodies.

'"You see, ladies and gentlemen," he remarked, laughing, "how very fond of me even the most untutored serpent is. Can't get along without me, so to speak. Come, Shivers," he said, addressing me by the offensive name which I have already told you had been bestowed upon me, and at which the audience laughed, though I do not know why; "not so affectionate, please. I told Shivers before we came on, ladies, that it is not good manners to be so demonstrative in public. Perhaps if you will add your little word he will uncoil." Whereupon, throwing back the tiger-snake into the box, he disengaged himself from my clutch. "I will take one at a time," he added, depositing half my length

on the table. "You shall see this wild, this absolutely untamed and untouched reptile lick the palm of my hand. Music, please."

'The dreamy throb of a waltz stole through the air. The man, still holding me by the neck, looked fixedly into my eyes. His cruel face was within a foot of my head. I thought of his brutality towards his gentle companion, now perhaps lying ill behind the coarsely painted scene, so emblematic of the mockery of her life, while he was torturing me for the amusement of his fellows; and my contempt outweighed my terror. I longed to strike, and determined to resist as far as possible the arts he was about to practice for my subjugation, and to risk his retribution.

'The music continued; the audience was watching breathlessly, eagerly, every eye gleaming like a star. By degrees I felt the man relax his hold on my neck. I remained quite still. Presently he freed me, and cautiously withdrew his hand. Now was the time. No, not yet. He had engaged that I

should lick his hand . . . . The spell was fast creeping over me: I fought it desperately. Beneath the slack coils in which I lay my muscles were alert as they had never been before, ready to stiffen on the instant like iron bands. I felt my folded fangs pressing spring-like against my jaw. I knew my venom bags were full to bursting.

'The man's eyes were still fastened upon mine—the eyes of a demon. I could no longer return their gaze. Slowly he advanced his hand; slowly, slowly, nearer and nearer.

'At length, with a rapidity that astonished even myself, I plunged my fangs deep into his flesh. A great gasp arose from the audience: the music ceased.

'"It is nothing," said the professor, disengaging my head with his other hand, "only a welcome opportunity of proving the efficacy of my preparation." And still holding me, he produced a small phial from his pocket, and drew the cork with his teeth.

'"You observe," he remarked, "I have no need even to relinquish my hold of this recreant, this treacherous friend who would fondle me one moment to kill me the next." So speaking, he poured half of the contents of the phial into a tumbler which the manager now brought him, and filled it with water. This he was on the point of drinking, when a rustle behind him caused him to turn round. It was Kitty, his companion, who, having recovered, and being unable to repress her anxiety, for of course she had witnessed these events, had come on to the stage, drawing her enfeebled form along with difficulty. "Charlie!" she gasped, "O, Charlie!"

'"Get back, you cursed fool!" muttered the man in an angry tone, not loud enough however to reach the audience, though it made her shrink as if struck; "get back!" Then facing about with a smile, he held the glass to his lips and tossed off the contents.

'"That, ladies and gentlemen, is the first part of the treatment. The second is this—I just

pour a small portion of the elixir upon the punctures and rub it in." He gave his hand to the manager, who performed the operations as he had indicated them. "You will notice that we use plenty of the fluid. It is so very volatile. The smart is trifling. Meanwhile we guard against mental dejection, which by diminishing the vitality is notoriously a contributing cause to many a fatality, by engaging our attention in current affairs. I accordingly continue my performance. Come, most deceitful Shivers!" he said, seizing me in an iron grip as though he would strangle me. "Come, let us perform the cobra dance. Music, please."

'I cannot say what impulse compelled me —perhaps it was the apparent failure of my scheme, perhaps the strange surroundings in which I found myself—but as he dropped me in a heap on the floor, I felt obliged, under his watchful, masterful eye, to follow, and to some extent to supplement, his antics. At one moment I was threading his legs; at another, winding up the one only to creep

down the other; at yet another, throwing myself into contortions upon the stage, and festooning his footsteps. The applause was absolutely deafening: the music could no longer be heard. Of a sudden, in the midst of this insane revelry, he made a false step and fell. Nor did he rise again immediately .... Ah!

'For a moment, for several moments, the audience had patience, regarding it as part of the performance. Then the music crept above the roar of human excitement. Yet he still lay there motionless beside me .... Ah!

'The manager came up, looked at him, seized him, and shook him. By this time the audience was afoot. "Ring down!" he said to a workman, and the man began to lower the curtain. The musician, not having observed the course of events, kept vigorously to his task, a Hungarian dance of Greig, the fierce chords clanging like bells in a storm. Of a sudden, a white form darted across the stage. "Charlie," it wailed, "O, Charlie! speak,

speak! . . . It has happened at last, dear Jesus, it has happened!"

'Then I knew my work was accomplished, and that it was time to go. So before my freedom attracted attention, I glided over the darkened stage, and skirting the flooring, sought and found a fissure through which I made good my escape."

'And did the man die?' asked Wriggle.

'He did,' replied Uncle Stretcher.

'But what happened to the woman?' said Coila.

'That I never knew,' replied her Uncle. She ought to have led a happier life; but women are strange creatures.'

VIII.

THE OLD MAN IN THE LOG HUT.

UNCLE STRETCHER lay convulsed with laughter. His long body shivered from end to end.

The little snakes on their arrival caught the infection, and began to laugh they knew not why. Coila said she 'could not help it, because uncle looked so funny.' Wriggle made no attempt to explain his emotions, which goes to show that they were both children of nature. When their mother appeared, she glanced from one to the other in utter perplexity. Then she also began to laugh. And so they all lay, with Uncle Stretcher leading the dance of inconsequent merriment.

Presently he subsided, and as the other three were merely laughing from sympathy, and quite without reason, they also did the same.

'What is the joke?' at length ventured Widow Scaley.

'The joke,' replied the old snake, 'is at present entirely my own property—a sudden gleam of recollection. As it is rather a lengthy affair, I think I will make it the subject of to-night's Man-story.'

There was general satisfaction at this, and even the inquisitive Wriggle had no questions to ask.

'A little way out of Trial Harbour,' he began, 'on the track to Heemskirk, overlooking a button grass swamp, stood, perhaps stands, a log hut. This was in the early days of the mining fever, and Zeehan had only just commenced its existence. Trial Harbour is in reality no harbour at all, but merely a small bay protected by a reef of rock, over which the slightest swell bursts in

an avalanche of spray and foam. Behind this reef is a landing-place, but no anchorage. No vessel has ever called at Trial Harbour except with considerable risk, and every visitor lies ready to stand out to sea at a moment's notice.

'On a coasting vessel which occasionally traded between the north-western ports and Hobart, according to the inducements that from time to time offered, a gaunt, venerable man, clad in a rusty frock-coat and dilapidated bell-topper hat, one day took passage at the latter port. He was a retired state school teacher, who, having determined from motives of economy to spend the remainder of his days away from the distractions of the town, and having assigned his pension to his creditors, was proceeding to the North-West with set purpose.

'This person, after selling what little he possessed, in due course embarked with all his worldly wealth in his pocket, except that which covered his back, and whatever might

be contained in a small, oblong, brown-paper parcel, from which by night or day he never parted company. This peculiarity, together with the traveller's striking figure, erect in spite of his years, and crowned with great clusters of white locks which escaped waywardly from beneath the deck-like brim of his monumental hat, soon drew all eyes towards him. The journey, however, was not long enough to afford occasion for more than an unsatisfied curiosity.

'The vessel, after a stormy passage round the South-West Cape, arrived in unsettled weather off Trial Harbour, where she had produce to land for the young and ravenous community. After some difficulty she managed to make the channel, and lay-to within the barrier. The old man, who had not been born to the sea, was glad enough of the opportunity of landing for a few hours to "stretch his legs," as he termed it, and in some measure to recover from the shaking-up at the weather-board, two-storied tavern,

that was the most noticeable structure in the settlement. It lay barely fifty yards from the beach, so he entertained no fear whatever of losing his passage when the time for sailing arrived.

'But as fate would have it, he had not been a quarter of the allotted time ashore, when one of those sudden squalls, so frequent on the West Coast, sprang up, and the half unloaded vessel was obliged to put out to sea again. She gave the usual warning, but before the old man could reach her she was already outside. At first he was greatly distressed, but falling in with some easy-going fellows on the grass-covered dune that does duty for a village green, he was prevailed upon to return to the tavern, where he forgot his sorrows in the convivial cup and before a blazing fire. Meanwhile the storm howled outside.

'The landlord, a shrewd person of genial corpulence, had no difficulty in discovering that the derelict was a man with money to

spend, and judging by the persistence with which he invariably sat upon his brown-paper parcel whenever he let it out of his hand, of further resources to fall back upon when that was exhausted. Therefore the landlord smiled on the stranger, and bade him a right hearty welcome to such rude comforts as his house might afford.

'The stranger, on his side, though learned in book lore, was singularly simple in worldly wisdom, and accepted this hospitality with a gentle gratitude that impressed those present. Before twenty-four hours had elapsed, the good-nature, the gracious manners, and the learning of the new-comer were the talk of the neighbourhood; but the landlord, having acquired what he instinctively knew to be his last "note," was growing more inquisitive than ever as to what might be the contents of the brown-paper parcel. The old man, in fact, while excusing himself on the score of infirmity from personally joining in every round, had been "shouting" for all and

sundry, not perhaps intentionally, but because in the innocence of his heart he did not know how to resist the leads of that gloriously thirsty and convivial company. But while he was provoking such diversely motived attention in those around him, he himself was entirely unconscious of it. So affairs remained during a week, he boarding in the house and consuming his fair share of salted mutton-bird, pork, and other delicacies then in season, and daily joining in the laughter with which the address of the tame duck of the household in catching the scraps thrown to it, as it wandered round the room at meal times, was hailed. Only one thing, indeed, jarred on the harmony of the district—the stranger would not give his name. When pressed on one occasion, he replied, with evident constraint, "Better say Blank, sir, call me Mr Blank." But the fiction was so transparent that nobody got further than Mister, by which name he was for some days exclusively known. Needless to add that this

incident was not lost upon the landlord. Meanwhile the weather continued dirty, and no return of his ship was signalled or even expected.

'At the expiration of the seventh day, the landlord, whose suspicions had by this time become certainties, presented his account, a modest one of some thirty shillings. The old pedagogue leisurely set his glasses squarely on his nose, carefully extracted the precious document from its totally unnecessary envelope, the mucilage of which was yet damp, and gazed at it long and steadily by the window. Meantime his host stood expectant at the door.

'"William Canot," at length the old man said, "come hither."

'The landlord approached.

'"How do you spell 'board and lodging to date,' William Canot?"

'The landlord looked up, at first surprised, and then angrily. But the old man did not notice this; his mind dwelt in a past resuscitated by the defective spelling.

'"I beg your pardon?" said the landlord.

'"How, sir, do you spell 'board and lodging to date?'"

'"Seemingly well enough for you to read," replied the landlord. "Come, none o' this; you know what I want . . . ." He stopped suddenly, as the old man drew himself up to his full height and raised his brown-paper parcel high in the air.

'"Unless you answer my question immediately, William, I shall be obliged to take extreme measures."

'"Pay me my money at once," replied the inn-keeper, thinking he had to do with a knave.

'The brown-paper parcel, propelled by the clockwork that once had been muscle, swooped down from its eyrie with a crash against his puffy cheek. The man reeled and fell, partly from the force of the blow, but chiefly through the unexpected assault throwing him off his balance.

'He rose to his feet foaming with rage; but the old man was quite calm, professionally so.

'"Now, sir," he said, "perhaps you will answer my question."

'What was in the landlord's mind at the moment it would be impossible to say, but instead of forthwith rushing, as he had intended, at his assailant, he wavered, looking this way and that. Evidently the man was a dangerous lunatic. Meanwhile his discomfiture had been taken advantage of by his assailant, who now stood with his back against the door, still holding the brown-paper parcel in his right hand and the hotel bill in his left.

'"William Canot, do you wish me to repeat my persuasion?"

'"What do you want me to do?" replied the landlord, cautiously—in fact, timidly.

'"Come, you are not so dense as all that, sir. Is not this your writing?" He held up the paper.

'"Certainly. I cannot keep clurks with folk like you preyin' on me."

'"No impertinence, sir. Proceed to spell what you have written."

'Some glimmer of schoolday methods shot across the man's mind. He spelt out the phrase laboriously:—"BORD, board; AND, and; LOGIN, lodgin'; TO, to; DAT, date."

'The old man let him finish without interruption. Then he said, "Your pencil, William!"

'The landlord fumbled a while in his pockets, at length extracting a whittled stump.

'"Good. You will take this paper and write as I tell you."

'He handed the bill to the perplexed fellow, who took it to the table in the window. Then in slow accents he spelt out the correct orthography of the sinning phrase.

'"Have you got it down?"

'"Yes."

'"Spell what you have written."

'The man spelt it.

'"Good. Now, William, don't let me see you again till you have written that out a thousand times. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Go!"

'The old man stalked with an air of dignity to the window, laid his brown-paper parcel on the table, and sat down upon it; while the landlord disappeared through the door.

'Suddenly a burst of laughter shook the crazy structure, and the sound of many feet tramping down the passage attracted his attention. He looked up to see a crowd, headed by the landlord, enter the room.

'"The man's mad; mad as anything, mind 'ow yer go near 'im!" shouted the short, plethoric, and excited proprietor of the establishment. "Instead 'o payin' my bill like a gennleman, 'e knocks me down and talks tommy-rot like they talks to kids."

'He looked round at the curious assembly. They did not seem inclined to view matters

in his light. The idea of the bony old man knocking down this burly fellow was immensely droll to most of them, and, while keeping a respectful distance from the schoolmaster, they began to ply him with comment and question.

'"Bill tells us you're a game old cock," said one; "knocked 'im out in one round."

'"Ay," said another, "no dirty tricks about him either, no hittin' below the belt, is there, Mister?"

'"My word! He's a grand old slogger!" put in a third, "quite an ac-qui-si-shun to the West Coast."

'At this sally there was a general titter.

'"Say, Dotty, how do you *spell* ac-qui-si-shun?" shouted someone, during the merriment—at which, renewed laughter.

'Meanwhile the schoolmaster had risen, and holding his brown-paper parcel aloft, endeavoured to obtain silence. He succeeded sooner than might have been expected, thanks to the general curiosity to hear him speak.

'"I don't know, gentlemen," he said, "what all this uproar means, but I am quite willing to discuss any proposal you may wish to put before me, if you will speak one at a time."

'The company was surprised at the calm dignity of his words and bearing. Those who had jeered at him looked as much abashed as their respective constitutions permitted. They had not expected this attitude at all. A little window breaking, with perhaps a free fight to follow, was much more the line of their anticipation.

'The landlord was the first to speak. "If 'e's comin' to reason, p'raps 'e'll stump up a little on account. My bill's thirty bob, an' wants payin' bad."

'The schoolmaster put his disengaged hand in his pocket, felt about, withdrew it empty.

'"You have my last penny," he said, simply.

'"What! Got no coin? pursued the landlord. "That tale won't wosh 'ere, 'owever it may in 'Obart. Wot yer got in that preshus bundle yer seem so blanky fond of?"

'"This?"

'"*That* . . . . What's in it?"

'"I am not accustomed to your manner of speech, sir."

'"Good deal I ain't accustomed to either in your manner o' dealin'. But you'll get mor'n you want if yer don't fork out jolly sharp."

'At this point there was a commotion at the doorway, and someone pushed his way into the room. It was an engineer of some consideration on the field, a dark square-built man of about thirty, with an earnest, honest face—a man, withal, universally respected and liked. He had already met the schoolmaster—had, indeed, partaken of his profuse, if unnecessary, hospitality.

'"What's all this, Canot?" he inquired, as he stepped through the front rank of spectators.

'"This precious lodger 'ere won't pay 'is bill. Knocked me down when I wanted the cash."

'"Come, come, don't talk nonsense, man.

Surely the thing might have been settled without all this gathering?"

'"He knocked Bill down, right enough, Mr Shand," said several voices, whose owners were anxious not to lose all interest in the affair.

'The engineer looked round. He was superior to those present, and resented their interference. Then, with a quick movement, he turned to the innkeeper, and spoke in his ear.

'"Can't turn 'em out, Mr Shand. Quite impossible. They've their rights like you 'n me, an thisyer's one on 'em."

'"Well, for Heaven's sake, man, let's get out of this. How much do you say he owes you?"

'"Thirty bob before breakust, this mornin'."

'"Here."

'Something glittered in the engineer's palm, which he transferred to that of the innkeeper.

'"Thankee, sir; 'ow 'bout this week?"

'"I'll see to that."

'The engineer stepped up to the schoolmaster.

'"Come with me," he said.

'He led the way through the crowd, the old man following, parcel under arm.

'And in this manner, the schoolmaster was introduced to the log hut, which, as I told you before, stood a short way out of Trial Harbour, on the track to Heemskirk. For the hut was untenanted, and belonged to the engineer, who, taking pity on the old man's predicament and age, and attracted by his kindly, if eccentric nature, placed him in possession of it, with the assurance that so long as he chose to occupy it, food and drink also should be his. The old man soon came to regard it as his permanent home, and no longer desired to continue the journey which had been so abruptly broken. There was no lack of visitors to the hut. Indeed, it speedily became the popular Sunday resort, whither whole parties would proceed, in the hope of "drawing him out." Whenever such a party arrived

the old man would welcome it, set his billy on the fire, and placing his brown-paper parcel (always held in one hand or the other) on the only chair of the establishment, would settle himself down upon it with almost regal ceremony, the guests responding to the implied invitation by accommodating themselves as best they could round the edge of the table, those excluded for want of room grouping themselves near the hearth. And so tea would be served out in the flickering light, amid much chatter, but more smoke. The dignified manner of the old man, however, kept these cruder spirits at bay, and more often they retraced their steps in disappointment, making the best they could of what little sparks of humour the more imaginative among them were able to fashion out of the recollections of their visit. Speculation as to the contents of the parcel had at one time been considerable, and plans for its seizure not a few, but so great was the reticence and vigilance of the old man in the log hut, that

success had attended none of their efforts. Standing, he held it; resting, he sat upon it; sleeping, it pillowed his head. Guarded alike by his silence and by his person, it remained the mystery it had always been to the community at large.

'Before definitely installing his tenant, the engineer had probed him in a tactful manner as to his means, not indeed with a view of in any way dispossessing the old man of what wealth he might possess, but in order to devise some plan which would divest the proposed arrangement of any semblance of almsgiving. For a long time the old man, not perceiving the trend of these inquiries, maintained an evasive attitude, and, indeed, it was not until he was finally settled that he volunteered any substantial information. One evening, however, the engineer, on his way home to Zeehan, stopped at the hut, and was warmly welcomed by its occupant.

'"Come in, Mr Shand," he said, "come in, sir. Let me tie up your horse for awhile."

'The engineer dismounted, tied his bridle to a tree, and entered.

'"I want most especially to see you," said the old man. "I have confidence in you, and would seek your advice. I have with me a parcel of immense value, and, in this desolate region, I am almost afraid to trust even myself with it. You see I am not so young or so strong as I used to be; and if anything happened to my parcel, I should have nothing further to live for."

'He paused. The engineer, happy to find him in so communicative a vein, and fearful of checking it, made no comment.

'"Now, sir, there is another point to be considered. I am dwelling here on your bounty; and I feel that, though the only return I can make is a princely one, and though I dread to part with any portion of my treasure, yet it must be done. Yes, sir, I have thought it over, and it must be done."

'"If you are as rich as you say, why did you not pay Canot?"

'"Pay Canot! Sir, I do not cast my pearls before swine; that man would have insulted my treasures. He cannot spell; he is capable of anything. But you, a man of education, of refinement, you will know how to appreciate their worth."

'He rose as he spoke, and withdrew the brown-paper parcel from under him. Then placing it on the rough table, he began methodically to untie the knot that held the string.

'The engineer looked curiously on. The wonderful parcel which had played so leading a part in the old man's career on the Coast, was about to have its secret revealed. Humanity reverences the cryptic, and the engineer felt almost as though he were countenancing a desecration. Yet he said nothing.

'The old man rolled up the string with deliberation into a neat coil and placed it in his pocket. Then with equal care he unfolded the wrapper. An oblong, gilt-edged

album bound in faded red morocco, appeared.

'"You see here," he said, placing the tips of his first and second fingers and thumb tripodwise on the cover, "one of the most valuable books in the world. Nay, I may say it is priceless. See!"

'He opened the book at random. The pages were covered with a motley patchwork of manuscript in many hands, each piece neatly secured by narrow paper bands.

'"Ah!" said the engineer, "they are——?"

"Autographs," replied the schoolmaster. "You have before you, sir, the Bunyan Collection."

"The Bunyan Collection? Excuse me but . . . eh! . . . Bunyan? Bunyan?"

'"I, sir, have that honour."

The engineer rose to the occasion and from his chair.

'"I apologise, Mr Bunyan; but indeed I did not know you. You have never mentioned your name, otherwise . . . ahem! . . . of course."

'"Exactly so, sir; to have disclosed my identity at an hotel might have jeopardised the collection. But now you will appreciate the almost insurmountable nature of the difficulties which beset me."

'"I do indeed."

'"You agree that I was not justified in breaking up the Bunyan Collection to pay an illiterate hotel bill?"

'"Not to be thought of; you must leave it to the nation."

'"To the Royal Society of Tasmania, sir, in trust. That most erudite body alone in these latitudes is able to duly protect it. I shall leave it to them, except of course the duplicates."

'"Ah! the duplicates. Are there many?"

'"Many, sir, is not the word. The Bunyan Collection is especially rich in duplicates."

'The engineer knew less than nothing about autographs, and he felt he was venturing beyond his depth. He accordingly deemed silence the better policy.

'"I have often thought," continued the schoolmaster, "that the duplicates are the more valuable portion of the collection. Nevertheless, ten Miltons seems too much. How, sir, does that strike you?"

'"As you say."

'"So that if I gave you one Milton . . . ?"

'"I should remain your lifelong debtor."

'"That, sir, is quite my view."

'He opened the album at another page.

"This is the one I am prepared to part with," he said, pointing to a signature that looked suspiciously like a lithograph.

'"I see; a very fine specimen indeed."

'"I should have liked to give you a Shakespeare, only we are rather short in them. These are the Shakespeares."

'He again turned over. The new specimens seemed even more like lithographs than the Milton.

'"They are very perfect," said the engineer. "You are a lucky man to possess so fine a collection."

'"I have often thought that myself," replied the schoolmaster, simply; "but you, sir, are even more fortunate in obtaining a Milton so easily—with so little trouble, I mean."

'"I am indeed," said the engineer, with a very creditable assumption of profound conviction.

'And so the engineer made his way home, with the Milton autograph in his pocket-book, and a mind full of the oddest mixture of amusement and sympathy that ever puzzled man.

'The engineer was a leading member of the leading set on the field, known to outsiders as the "toffs," to insiders as the "boys," and in the sacred precincts of his little two-roomed hut, a fortnight later, he entertained a select party by a recital of his adventures with the old man in the log hut (as the schoolmaster was generally termed), illustrated by the great Milton autograph. There was a good deal of merriment that

night in the engineer's humpy, for the "boys" dearly loved a joke; and the most abandoned witticism became probable, and even logical, when associated with the old man in the log hut.

'"Now, boys," said the engineer, as the company was about to disperse at the end of the evening, "whatever you do, don't let him see you're fooling, so keep within bounds. He's just crazy over his autographs, and you'll kill him outright if you hurt or hide them."

'One morning, shortly after this, the schoolmaster received a communication which greatly pleased him. He found it lying on his table on returning from a stroll with the Bunyan Collection along the track that leads to Zeehan. It was contained in a plain envelope, secured by an extravagant seal in red wax. The old man cut carefully round the seal, and drew forth a missive which read as follows:—

ZEEHAN, July 15th, 18—.

My dear Sir,

But for the admirable discretion which has caused you to withhold your name during the

period in which you have honoured this field with your presence, you would have heard from me ere this.

By the merest chance I learnt your identity from our mutual friend, Mr Shand, and as an ardent collector myself, hasten to let you know how great a favour you would be conferring were you to allow me to view your renowned collection of autographs.

Unless I hear to the contrary, I will come over next Thursday evening, when I will also take the opportunity of showing you a few curiosities out of my own small portfolio, which I believe will be of interest to you.

I trust you will pardon this request from a total stranger, but no doubt by this time you know the friendly habits of the field quite as well as you must understand the enthusiasm of a fellow-collector.

My dear Sir,

Yours faithfully,

RICHARD LITTLE,

Agent for the Silver Syndicate of Franklin.

P.S.—Do not trouble to reply unless the proposal is inconvenient.

'The old man read this several times attentively through, and finally placed it in the breast pocket of his coat. From that moment his thoughts dwelt on the future.

'By the assistance of a vast amount of patience, Thursday evening at length ar-

rived. The old man made up a glorious leaping fire, set his largest billy to heat, spread his only cloth, and produced from a venerable mineral-oil case, which was nailed to the wall by way of cupboard, several wrecked knives, ancient two-pronged forks, tin plates and mugs, which he proceeded to group with a view to sociable display. He also extracted from the mysterious regions beneath his bunk a tin of meat, a hunk of damper, and a packet of tea. Having finished these preparations he lit his pipe and sat down on the Bunyan Collection.

'He remained thus for some considerable time. At length his pipe burnt out, and the billy had to be taken off lest it should boil over. Yet no visitor appeared. The old man began to get anxious. He took out the letter of announcement, which he read through in a nervous, fidgety way. Then he went to the door, unbolted it, and stood listening. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night. Finally he stepped in, re-

locked the door, and with a sigh sat down to his usual solitary repast.

'He was not an epicure; and had he been, there was little in the larder to encourage a prolonged sitting. A small piece of corned beef, a few square inches of damper, and two pannikins of milkless tea completed his refreshment. This consumed, he rose, and mechanically began to clear away. But ere the cloth could be removed, the sound of hoofs grew plainly audible, and so, hastily replacing the unused utensils, he hurried again to the door. As he opened it, a horseman drew up without.

'"Mr Bunyan?"

'"The same."

'"My name is Little; I trust you received my note?"

'"I did, sir, and heartily welcome. I feared you were not coming, and have just finished my tea."

'"That's all right; I had mine before leaving."

'"I am glad to hear it, sir; I had not much to offer you."

'Imagine an up-standing, rosy-cheeked, grey-eyed, fair, curly-haired fellow of five and twenty, with the buoyant recklessness of a sailor and the acumen of a lawyer, and you have the agent for the Silver Syndicate of Franklin. He leapt to the ground, and after securing his horse, and unstrapping a parcel from the bow of his saddle, entered the hut.

'The two men walked to the fire. No greater contrast than that between them could be imagined. The one tall, withered, earnest, and dignified, a mid-winter study in black and white; the other, a very emblem of youth and strength, glowing with the tints of the early summer of life.

'"I have brought an old friend with me, Mr Bunyan, for company's sake," remarked the new-comer.

'The schoolmaster looked round perplexed. "I trust, sir, I have not bolted him out."

'"O dear me, no. There he is, in his overcoat, on the table." He indicated the parcel with his finger.

'"The curiosities you mentioned in your letter, I presume?"

'"No," tapping his pocket; "they are all safe here. My friend there is more sociable."

'"Indeed!" The old man felt quite bewildered. He did not understand a figure of speech, except between the covers of a book, where it might be leisurely pored over and parsed.

'The agent took the parcel and unwrapped it, producing a black bottle. "My very excellent friend *Dewdrop*!" he exclaimed, as he held it up.

'"Ha, ha! A capital idea, sir. I am sorry to say I have none in the hut."

'"I think *Dewdrop* is able to meet all demands. What say you to an experiment? I am cold."

'Before the schoolmaster had time to

reply, the young man was pouring some of the contents into a pannikin. "Say when!"

'"Only a spot for me; pray keep that yourself, sir."

'The pannikins were filled up with hot water.

'"Ki-ora! as we have it in Maoriland," toasted the agent, who was a New Zealander, raising the tin to his lips.

'"Your good health!" responded the old man.

'Under the stimulus of the cheerful fire, the pleasant chatter of his visitor, and the subtle influence of Dewdrop and tobacco, the old man was speedily set at his ease, an object the ingenious Little had all along thoroughly in view. Before the night was much older, indeed, the glass kerosene lamp was drawn close up; and, in spite of the agent's protestations, he found himself obliged to occupy the only chair. Finally, the famous collection was produced, the schoolmaster proudly but reverently opening it out for his visitor's inspection.

'"These, sir, are our Shakespeares. Only two, you will perceive. Observe the difference in the formation of the K. That is the earlier. This is at least fifteen years later. I have, sir, a theory that the modification in the K is due to the strain on the author's penmanship, caused by the dramatic output between 1597 and 1610. Thirteen years of such production, sir, must have told very seriously upon it."

'"My dear Mr Bunyan, these are treasures indeed! Your theory is most ingenious; I must reconsider the question. The K has always been a particular difficulty with me. Perhaps you have seen my treatise 'On the K in Shakespeare.' Not . . . ? But pray fill your cup; it has stood empty this five minutes."

'The old man recharged.

'"I should like to know your views on this point, sir, if you have no objection."

'"I hardly think I can lay my hand on that treatise now, there was such a run on it. The idea, however, was that after 1897 . . ."

'"1597?"

'"1597, I mean; after that year the bard sought afflatus in the bottle, to the detriment of his penmanship, though to the everlasting renown of his production."

'"A very remarkable theory, sir!"

'"Only a *suggestion*, you know, but a good deal of internal evidence to support it. I worked it up at the time. Plays read to me more like a wine-merchant's descriptive catalogue after that . . . Here, I see, are your Miltons."

'"Yes. We mourn the loss of one. That is the meaning of the black edging round the vacant place."

'"Ah, it is always a wrench to part with a specimen. Bad as signing bills, in its way."

'"O, far worse, sir. It dwells so on one's mind."

'"Still, you have nine left; and if the missing one is what you gave Shand, well, it is in good hands. Told you he was going

to get it framed? Not? Well, I never! He is though."

'"It hardly makes up my loss, does it?"

'"Just what I used to say; but since all these new discoveries, why, bless my soul, it has almost become a pleasure to give. Not heard of the discoveries? Where have you been living all this time?"

'The old man puffed hard at his pipe for a moment or two, swallowed another draught of Dewdrop, and sat down on the edge of the table.

'"What discoveries, sir, do you allude to?"

'"To these recent rich finds of intimate correspondence in the castles of Europe. But you must have heard of them?"

'"Indeed I have not."

'"Remarkable! why, the world is ringing with it. Didn't you read about it in the *Mercury* the other morning?"

'"I never see a paper."

'"I will try and find it for you."

'"I shall be really grateful to you."

'The young man refilled the pannikins.

'"Come, you must keep me company," he said. "You are one behind already." The comment was hardly justified, since the speaker had barely tasted the beverage, though he kept up a show of refilling his pannikin from time to time, in order to "keep up the pace" as he phrased it.

'"These discoveries have quite put the old collections out of date."

'"Out of date, Mr Little?"

'"In a sense, most certainly. I am not denying that the *backbone* of a collection does not consist of what you have here, but the new method insists on something more than a formal letter or plain signature; it requires something that *shows the man.* Perhaps a signed sentiment, though this applies only to the moderns; better still, a note written on some matter of everyday life. Do you understand? Yes? Then you will at once see that the new autography is something very

different from the old, something fuller of life, of go, of human interest."

'"Amazing, sir; indeed amazing!"

'"This, Mr Bunyan, is an age of progress. The word 'amazing' is wiped from our dictionaries. Fortunately, I am in a position to show you what this new era of autography is. I have succeeded in securing a fair share of these newly found specimens, and some of them I have brought with me to-night."

'The old man's eyes gleamed. Thanks to Dewdrop, he already regarded his visitor as an almost supernatural being of transcendent knowledge and skill. The new theory of the Shakespearian K had come as a revelation to him. In his retirement he had only been able to conceive of one solution to that fascinating mystery, but this stranger had come in with an alternative suggestion, based, no doubt, on a wider knowledge, and stamped by public acceptance. At least, so it appeared to him.

'The agent drew a packet from his pocket.

'"Here we are!" he said, as he opened it. He ran his eye over several dockets it contained, and at length selected one.

'"What do you think of this? A priceless note from the great artist Turner."

'He carefully spread a discoloured paper out on the table.

'"Turner without the mask, as his contemporaries knew him," he said; "read it; but perhaps you had better let me, since I have already deciphered it."

'The old man's head nearly touched that of his guest, as the latter read as follows:—

Sorry can't give TWO coats at the figure named. A guinea a coat is the best I can do while the price of dryers remains at present level. Terms cash in advance, unless purchaser will permit mortgage on priming and first coat, to raise funds for second.

J. W. M. TURNER, Painter and Decorator.

Queen Anne Street, 12th Jan. 1804.

'The agent turned enthusiastically to the old man.

'"There! What do you say to that?"

'The schoolmaster could hardly repress his delight.

'"You are right, sir; there *is* human nature in it. You can see the man."

'"Can't you? Hardworking, plodding fellow, borrowing as he went along, natural as anything, anxious to do a deal on the best terms, careless of immortal fame as you or I. What would the coloured photo market be like to-day had he only been alive? He'd have knocked prices down!"

'"How you read between the lines, sir! I should never have made out all that. It throws a new light on history."

'"That is just it; we collectors are going to re-write history." The old man had taken the paper in his hand and was examining it carefully at the lamp.

'"Wonderful! wonderful!" he exclaimed.

'Meanwhile his guest was again appealing to the dockets.

'"Here is something else that will interest

you," he said. "It is a 'quotation' from Caxton."

'The old man bent down with renewed interest as the agent read as follows:—

Memo. *from* WILLLIAM CAXTON, JOB PRINTER. Cards a Speciality.	WESTMINSTER, *June 20th*, 1478. *To* MASTER DOE, CHARING CROSS.
Our price for circulars of quality named is five shillings per thousand. Awaiting esteemed commands. —Yours faithfully, W. CAXTON, Government Printer.	

'"There! As you see, the origin of the memorandum form, before printed headings came in."

'The schoolmaster was speechless. He laid the "Turner" incontinently down, and tremulously raised the "Caxton," cradled in both hands, to the light. The young man beat a devil's tattoo on the table with the

fingers of his left hand. Not the ghost of a smile crossed his face.

At length the schoolmaster found words. "You have an unique collection, sir," he said, "an unique collection!"

'"Oh," replied his visitor, "this isn't my collection. These are the duplicates."

'"*Duplicates!!!*" It was almost a shriek.

'Most people, arrived at this point, would have taken pity on the simple enthusiast, but not so the agent; he was just midway with his scheme, and was the last person in the world to take back a lame tale to the "boys."

'"My dear sir," he said, "the world is flooded with these things. It is only a question of knowing where to go and the price to pay. Look here; here are some more," and he spread two or three other dirty pieces of paper under the lamp. "Let me read them. This, for instance, is a Raphael. It is addressed to an English newspaper proprietor. It runs:—

In reply to yours of Wednesday last, I think most

artists would prefer country to town, were it not for its excessive and insufferable top lighting.

Your obedient servant,

RAPHAEL.

April 1st, 1514."

'"But," objected the schoolmaster, "Raphael never wrote English?"

'"It seems he did, though. That is just one of the things the new school are going to teach the historians. After all, what more natural than for a member of a courteous race, and an artist to boot, to reply in the language of his interrogator? O, bless you! if we only knew, nearly all these foreigners spoke English."

'"You think so?"

'"I am sure of it!"

'"Dear me, sir, what times we are living in!"

'"As you say. But listen again. Here is a Wagner, also in English. It is addressed to Barnum, the great showman, who was, as I daresay you know, a particular friend of his.

BEYREUTH, November 5th, 1842.

My dear Barnum,

I have just received your cable about coming over to your glorious country to join your proposed troupe of celebrities, but I don't think I could stand the band. As to my operas, if you think it would make them go down better with the public, do as you suggest by all means. I really have no choice, but no harm could be done if you introduce "God bless the Weasel" into Tannhauser, and "Pop goes the Queen" into Lohengrin. Anywhere will, of course, do. What droll names you Americans give your breakdowns, to be sure!

Well, so long, from your devoted,

RICHARD WAGNER.

'"Could anything be more intimate than that? You can almost see him sitting down beside his mug of beer to dash it off, can't you?"

'"You can indeed, sir. These documents are revelations to me. I had no idea of their existence."

'"Well, Mr Bunyan, you have done me a good turn in so good-naturedly showing your great collection; will you allow me to acknowledge it in a more permanent manner than

by thanking you? Will you accept of these trifles?"

'"TRIFLES, sir! YOU call them trifles. Why, sir, they are beyond price. Were I to accept them I should never dare to look at them again, for every sight of them would recall the fact that I had taken advantage of a guest!"

'"But, my dear Mr Bunyan, I have already told you these are my duplicates."

'The old man pondered a moment. "That is so," he replied. "It makes a difference, does it not? The Bunyan Collection is especially rich in duplicates. It has nine Miltons, for instance. Now listen, Mr Little, while I make a proposal. Will you accept of a Milton?"

'"My good Mr Bunyan, if I did that, I should plunge headlong yet further into your debt. You seem to forget that I look upon it as a signal privilege to be allowed to supplement, in a small way, your great national undertaking."

'"I begin to grasp your point of view. You are a patriot, sir, and would like to see your unparalleled possessions in hands that would value them,—that would eventually pass them on as an inheritance to the people?"

'"You have hit my idea."

'"Under these circumstances, then, sir, I would gladly take charge of them."

'"I am pleased to hear you say that; we will paste them in before I go."

'"Paste them in, sir! that would be barbarous."

'"Yes, I know it's the old-fashioned idea, but so many good things have got lost by neglecting this precaution that the new school makes a point of sticking them down TIGHT."

'"Surely that must prevent their examination for water-mark and texture, sir, not to instance writing on the reverse?"

'"Oh, no; a photograph can at any time show that. Wonderful thing photography!

Besides, these specimens have no writing on the reverse."

'"Well, as the documents are yours, and you seem so sure about it, I suppose it is all right. But, candidly, I dislike the idea."

'"If you have a little flour, Mr Bunyan, we can get under weigh at once."

'The old man rose and groped about beneath his bunk for the flour-bag. Meanwhile, the agent, after having mixed a fresh dose of whisky, both for his host and for himself, spread out his "gift to the nation," ready to receive the paste.

'Ten minutes later, the Bunyan Collection was enriched by four new specimens. To ensure their permanence, they were pasted inside the covers at either end of the album.

'Then the young man rose to leave. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour (it was nearly midnight), he looked even fresher and more merry than when he arrived.

'I do not think the schoolmaster ever found out the trick played upon him that

evening. A long while after, when the engineer happened to call one day in passing, the old man was still quite enthusiastic over his acquisitions. He had learnt to read between the lines in an alarming manner, and was quite engrossed with a new theory concerning the rise in prices since the days of Turner. In short, he was a promising member of the "new school." When I last heard of him he was as eccentric as ever, and the stories festooned around his name, of which this is one, had multiplied exceedingly in number.

'Now, children, you have had your laugh, and knew what started me off when you arrived and found me chuckling; so I think I have done my share of this evening's entertainment.

Which saying, the old snake sought a well-earned repose.

IX.

The Hermit of Settlement Island.

'There is perhaps no contrast on this island more remarkable than that furnished by the waters on either side of Hell's Gates. Without, lash the everlasting rollers of the Southern Ocean, lit by mad patches of fickle sunshine, or overcast by inky clouds, against the stern bastions of the West Coast, or coaxingly heave against its iron ramparts, alternately demanding and pleading entrance to the peaceful haven of Macquarie. But once within, those wild waters strive no more, giving way to laughing ripples and level expanses, which wind between luxuriantly wooded foot-hills in great sweeps beneath the

giant ranges. And so for mile after mile into the island towards the South East, becoming browner and more brown as the fierce ocean water mingles with the tawny and calmer floods of the King River and the Gordon.'

Uncle Stretcher had grown quite enthusiastic, and it was easy to see that he was about to relate the story he best loved. There was a breathless silence as he paused for a moment before continuing.

'From the most remote antiquity, nature has regarded this beautiful retreat as the treasury of her most idyllic moods. Even the heavy pervading fog-banks, which often for days together, after their long journey on the wings of the gale from the lands of Frost and Fire, lie brooding at the Gates, are here forbidden entry, until, wrung of their evil dews, and purified throughout their murky fabric, they have toiled over the guardian promontory which ends in Cape Sorell, when, transformed and scented with the fragrance of the gum trees, they float like grey swans

on the infinite sea of heaven. It is here the sun lies on high, laughing from morn to night, filling everything with a contagious happiness, that reflects itself no less in the dimples of the embracing mountains than in the sparkling levels of the lake-like basin, and in every leaf of every tree that thrives. And when it regretfully sets, the stars take up the happy vigil, slyly peeping through the curtains of the night at their lord's favourite, and chattering together concerning the beauties of his choice, till Dame Moon appears, and sends them all on their several ways. Then, indeed, the scene grows fraught with a mystic and supernatural loveliness, so that no worldly art, whether of word or image or sound, may enunciate its parts or their significance in shape, in texture, or in hue; for the one merges into the other, not each with its kind as in daytime, but shape with hue, and hue with texture, and texture with shape, and again each with itself, and all with all; yet withal in nowise transgress-

ing the due order of nature. And these things hold dominion over the arrogant intellect, so that it becomes again, as in the beginning, helpless, and cognisant of its essential poverty, but thereby the wiser.

'For these reasons would it seem fitting that this spot should be a place to be desired of men; yet was it not so. Such is their incomprehensible perversity, that instead of the great and wise ones among them hazarding all dangers to attain its shores, those weak in mind and morals, in body and estate, were driven with torture there, to finish their existence in torment both of soul and body. And hence the ominous name by which its portals are known, though they would be more truly described as the Gates of Paradise, since gates are reputed by what they contain, and not by that which they exclude, and the eternities are of more consequence than the transient vicissitudes of human history.

'But the convicts had, at the time of

which I speak, long ceased to exist in Macquarie Harbour. The settlement had been broken up, and some of the malefactors had been shipped further south, while more had died. Nothing of them now remained but an island graveyard and some ruined buildings. Only these, and the scenes of this grim sacrilege (this crime against the very sanctuary of nature), Settlement, Condemned, and Dead Islands, by their names reminded man, if through any chance he happened to pass that way, of the horrors and sufferings his kind had once there countenanced. But the islands, disdainful of the sullied records of humanity, still slumbered on the brimming tide, in all their primæval and intrinsic beauty. Nay, they had even gained in loveliness thereby, for the sheer walls of the old court-house now stood wreathed in creeping plants and garlanded with blossoms, while the governor's garden had long since proclaimed its independence, spreading whithersoever the kindly soil would give it lodging and food.

Settlement or Sarah Island lies so close to the mainland that but a short swim bridges the distance. I had, indeed, been living there some months during one summer, when, to my great surprise (believing, as I did, the island to be deserted), I discovered one morning traces of human occupation—I saw a goat. Now, the goat is an over-sea animal domesticated by Man; I therefore concluded she had either been left by the officers of the convict station, or else that she belonged to some person then living on the island. Accordingly, I set about to discover which surmise was correct, for I have always had a salutary respect of the human being until I know all about him. The surest method of deciding the problem was to make the circuit of the shore. This, indeed, being greatly indented, and at parts almost impassable except at low water, took me some days to accomplish, but I had not completed my journey before all doubts were dispelled by the figure of a man standing at the mouth

of a small cavern, almost concealed by shrubs.

'He had not perceived me; indeed, he was not looking in my direction when I sighted him, so I encountered no difficulty in taking stock of him and his surroundings. A venerable creature, with long, white, uncropped hair, somewhat disorderly, perhaps, by the standards of the township, and yet not altogether unseemly. His clothes were rough and dark; round his neck a checkered blue scarf, the only streak of colour about his person. At first he appeared to me to be unoccupied, but after a while I saw he was eating; and I divined, by his general lack of animation, that his physical powers were exhausted, or at least impaired. The mouth of the cave stood but slightly above flood level, and on the rocks hard by lay a small raft, so rudely fashioned that when viewed at a little distance, it appeared more like wreckage, than the result of ordered handicraft. It was a remarkable situation for any man, let alone an old one; and the more I mused, the

more utterly out of the common it seemed. The island had no reputation for mineral wealth; there was certainly no treasure (its antecedents forbade that supposition), nor was there animal life; and whatsoever of vegetables there might have been, it would hardly, of itself, have supported human existence.

'True, there was the old kitchen-garden, and quite a jungle of descendants from the original mint and raspberry beds. Mint and raspberry! What man could live on such fare, and an old one, too? Besides, they were only for a season, and how withstand the winter? Of course I did not forget the goat, and then there was fish. Ah, fish! therein lay a solution. But what had brought him here? That was yet a greater mystery. In good truth, a very curious discovery this of the man; and I then and there determined to find out all about him, though the task seemed hard enough. When you can hear a man talk you may learn something, but this solitary old fellow had no one with whom to

converse, so that my observations would necessarily be restricted to his actions, and he seemed so very decrepid that I felt sure these would not err on the side of demonstrativeness.

'While I was thus reasoning, the old man had finished his repast, and, abruptly grasping his staff, disappeared up a gully that opened out hard by. I availed myself of his absence to make a closer inspection of the retreat. A few minutes brought me to the entrance of the cavern. On the way, I passed many fish bones littering the surrounding scrub, thus confirming my surmise as to his principal means of support, as well as serving to show that his tenancy had already been of some duration. Arrived at the threshold, I exercised a certain caution, lest, chancing on some companion of his exile, my existence might meet with an abrupt termination. But precaution was needless, for the place was utterly deserted.

'I went in. It was a low, arched, but shallow chamber, naturally formed in the

rock. A pile of dry fern, doubtless serving the purpose of a couch, was heaped at the further extremity, while several rough utensils, fashioned out of sea-shells, wood, and forked sticks, together with an old piece of hoop iron, shaped like a knife, lay on the ground, just within the entry. And that was all.

'Men have a legend concerning one Diogenes, a critic, who lived meanly among his own kind; but this being outvied Diogenes, in that he seemed indifferent to the society or wonderment of his fellows, and to the poorest comforts of their civilisation. I felt, indeed, I was face to face with one peculiar among men, and for an instant desired to be of his kindred, that I might learn his thoughts. But I was wrong, and little reckoned on what was in store for me.

'I had by this time become so interested in these speculations that I failed to keep a watchful ear on the movements of their subject. Indeed, to my consternation, while I was yet in the fern heap, the man suddenly

appeared in the doorway. I judged it best to lie quiet, trusting to chance for an opportunity of slipping away, later on. Imagine, however, my predicament when, instead of my cautious scheme being allowed to mature, the man, after placing a wooden bowl he held in his hand on the ground, advanced towards the litter, and threw himself down almost upon me. His head, indeed, rested upon my coils, though there was luckily a fairly thick cushion of fronds between us. And then began a most remarkable scene. The old man lay for some time moaning and varying his position as though he were in pain. But as time wore on, these things ceased, and he began to talk; now fiercely combating the arguments of some hidden adversary, now speaking in his defence, then soothing him with soft phrases, and yet again pausing, as though listening in rapt attention to an inaudible reply.

'At first I attributed his speech to the roving brain-activity of disturbed slumber; but as I caught the vein of sense which con-

nected the phrases, I knew this could not be. Nor was it madness, since, as far as I could judge, his words were fraught with a profound earnestness; and therefore, seeing that he was alone and awake, I judged that in this wise he communed with himself. The very words he used are no longer at my command, but the substance and manner of his discourse I recollect minutely.

'"Debtors," he said, fiercely addressing his imaginary auditor, "who said debtors? I? .... Ay, in verity, I myself. All debtors, with never a creditor! Oh, merciless scheme of Universe, Juggernaut, Hell-devised torment!

'"Nay, good friend, you are harsh, for is not the toilsome recognition of such debt the better part of its repayment! Is there no breeding, no courtesy of intellect, which may phrase submission into conquest? . . .

'"What a farce is this, to lean on the forged charter of a galley-slave! Oh, most vaunted champion, think you to balance the

eternal account with a little parrot-talk? . . . You deny the premiss? What say the philosophers? what Locke? what Condillac? Accurate speech breeds accurate thought. In substance that! Observe, I pray, words govern thought, not thought words. Words are the crutches of thought. Do I not know? Have I not acquired tongues to trace this kinship? Tongues of the East and of the West, as well as the crude articulations of savage races, thirty all told. In which, I ask, does thought precede the word? The evidence is all the other way. What say the teachers? This: that no tongue is acquired until the student begins to think in it. Mark that—think in it. Unconscious, but yet most practical recognition of the dominion of word over thought. In the face of such evidence, who dare assert the contrary? And yet the wisest are duped by the glitter of these counters!

"You know it; ah, I see you know it. Then why not make avowal? Listen, once

more. The ultimate lesson of Positivism completes the fell chain. For if words dominate thought, not less does matter dominate both. Matter, consciousness; words, thought; hopes blighted, and aspirations crushed. Yet is such the genealogy that matter whispers words and words repeat to thought.

'"But observe: we struggle against this view. How readily, indeed, would we not barter all knowledge for the certainty that our lurking fears are without foundation, that the thraldom of intellect is a chimera; how willingly place it where we feel it ought to be, as the master, and not the humoured bondsman of matter!

'"What have I done that I speak thus? Tell me, rather, what I have left undone. It would be a briefer tale. Have not I sacrificed all that men may? Have not I subdued the flesh to release the spirit? Have not I abjured all the grosser ties of life? Do I call a brother my debtor? Inform me where the conditions prevent demonstration, if merely

the tie of life intervene. Why, then, has it been withheld?

'"Again; again, I say! What mad suggestion is this? So I must die to learn! Ha, ha; a merry thought indeed! Die to learn; die to learn! But the idea is not quite unpleasing. It grows on one, reckless gambler that I am! At the same time, my very excellent friend, permit me to observe, you cater well when you would serve up a fallacy. . . . Note well, a fallacy. The position is this: The word-conjuring you identify with intellect exists through matter. Therefore, in severing my relations with matter, I sever my connection with intellect, as you and I understand it. The odds, you see, are by your own showing vastly in favour of the bank.

'"No, no; you have not to deal with a schoolman, nor did I come here, a scientific gambler, to destroy myself. Try once again!

. . .

'"Now we touch the point. Now we speak sense. The Positivists do not go far enough.

That is most truly observed. Their physics and their chemics have narrowed their minds. They have analysed themselves out of all sense of grasp . . . There again I agree with you when you speak of an universality of intellect, and that it is to be measured in terms of its highest and not of its lowest manifestation; you have my view exactly. The scheme of universe is not fractional, it cannot be, it cannot be. What is fractional; is our word-conjuring? Let us frankly recognise that the universe is not fettered by our limitations. Yet this is not all my view, by no means all. Indeed, you miss the chief point. For intellect to me is not a mere bricklaying with word, sentence, and syllogism; it comprises all the higher impulses, to which logic-chopping is merely an insignificant appendage. Upon whose authority, for instance, think you, do we set this all-pervading sense of hope, which bids and bids us search into matter, not necessary for the maintenance of earthly existence, at the feet of words? Surely on

that of this self-same symbol-tied reasoning power? And so, with a false calm, we vainly endeavour to blind ourselves, in the name of science, to the significance of its paramount influence. For, mark you, we do not reason this sense of hope into being; on the contrary, this sense of hope incites us to exercise our limited reason,—a point which even Spencer's ghost-theory cannot overthrow. Have I proved my contention? Have I shown that reason, the product, is no fitting judge for that which compels it?

'"But if we call reason intellect, how much more intellectual, more spiritual that is to say, must be this sense of hope? Surely it is a thing to be reckoned with, not to be speciously explained away. And so we come to the kernel of the whole matter; for since this great incentive, which so controls our highest actions, is, in its most imperious expression, a yearning for immortality, immortality alone can, in a universe which knows no waste, be its fulfilment. And further, I see in the compassion,

in the affinity which those of the highest intellectual development show towards other forms of life, a universality of intellect pervading all life. Now, perhaps, you see the drift of this argument, imperfectly expressed though it be. The way to knowledge lies, firstly, by placing less reliance on symbol-tied reason; and secondly, by placing more reliance on our intellectual affinity with other forms of life. Thus may we hope at length to determine the modes and degrees of intellect through life; and finally, perhaps, to solve the most profound problem of all—the relation of life to this universe.

'"What do you say? I pray you reconsider that objection. How is it possible, my good sir, to serve two masters? No; I greatly rejoice that I have done with balances and alembics, with crucibles and phials, and all the precisions of the laboratory and the study. For such precisions are limitations, and a philosophy founded upon them is merely an attempt to reason by limiting the illimitable,

and by blinking the primal forces of existence, substituting therefor the conventions of human speech. In short, Positivism as a philosophy is a fraud.

'"Phew! At what an alarming speed we travel; I do but see the hedgerows pass like furrows! Nevertheless, as earnest of sincerity, here am I on Settlement Island, by night and by day, seeking, through communion with nature, to wrest those secrets which for so long have defied mankind. And how, you ask, do I propose to effect my purpose? By a right simple method: merely by obeying the great cardinal impulses, which, as I earnestly believe, impregnate all animate nature, but which, so far, have been left to the poet, the painter, and the musician to interpret. Nor shall I rest content till each creature is prevailed upon to deliver me up the recital of its sorrow and its joys. I have much to unlearn, much, I fear, to acquire, ere this is accomplished; but in these solitudes I already begin to forget the perversions of human learning, I

begin to know (as before I conjectured) that there is a means by which, without the intervention of language, we may commune with bird, and beast, and fish, ay, and peradventure with plants and herbs also; and that in this wordless habit of intellect, a path to the core of things lies."

'The old man ceased, and, stretching out his arm for support, prepared to rise. His hand passed through the yielding litter, and came in contact with me. I felt his nervous start, as, with an exclamation of surprise, he hastily withdrew it, and leapt to his feet.

'"So ho; what have we here?" he said, already dispersing the frond with his foot. "By providence, a serpent! Lying on a serpent the while I lazily review my course of life! Something dramatic in that, at any rate; something significant also, if I mistake not . . . Not so fast, my friend," he continued, as he saw me preparing to make a dash for liberty, "not so fast"; and taking a step back, he picked up the wooden bowl he had

set by the entry ere he lay down, and placed it beside my head. There was no mistaking its contents. It was half full of warm, new milk. "Share my meal," he said, "for you also have need to live." Then my heart went out to him, for, coupling his words and this action, I knew he intended me no hurt. So, to demonstrate my confidence, I immediately and without hesitation began to lap it up. At this the old man chuckled, in a pleased, half-doting manner. Presently he knelt down by my side and stroked me as I lay; and in the half-light of the evening, screened into a blue grey by the rocky labyrinths by which it had wandered, our eyes met, and a strange thrill tore through my veins. The man had suddenly vanished, and I saw only those two eyes, clear as crystal and luminous as the harvest moon. I felt no desire to avoid them; on the contrary, I returned their gaze (a gaze filled with infinite tenderness) till they seemed to melt into one stream. And then, on that full-orbed field, as though in phantasmal pro-

cession, I perceived his thoughts unroll, as he on his side must have mine, and forthwith I knew him as I know myself. For no sooner was this luminous avenue established between us, than our ideas flowed together, growing harmonised, if not identical; and, like as the level of the haven adjusts itself with many a rise and fall to that of the ocean, so did our differences of view dissolve one into the other, till I was no longer the serpent nor he the man, but each regarded each as might twin peaks in the flush of morn, above the rolling cloudbanks—with brotherliness, with freedom, and with exultation. For the Great Mystery lay unveiled before us; its wrappings were the sport of our strength. And there remained no sense of time nor of space, but instead thereof an infinity of extension, wherein we floated, merged, and yet separate, co-equal and co-eternal. In this manner I perceived that our spiritual principles, though masquerading for awhile under different material guises, and though unequally burdened for

the time being by the flesh, were essentially one and the same—the same in origin as in destiny. And I knew the time would come when, again, freed of earthy limitations, we would rejoice in our regained liberty, as we once had departed from it with regret. I cannot tell you all that passed between us, for much of it cannot be expressed. Much, however did pass, though this little must now suffice your curiosity.

'After awhile, the jealous flesh began to regain its numbing supremacy, and slowly the bond between us weakened, till finally it was dissolved, so that the mind's eye faded away, and the old man reappeared. When this had happened, I found he had ceased to stroke me, though he was still kneeling, watching by my side. At length he spoke.

'"It has been permitted me to learn this evening," he said, "more than a life of study and privation has afforded. Though due to you, I owe you no gratitude, nor you me; but I offer praise indeed to the Supreme Being,

who has so graciously healed my misgivings. If, perchance, you may understand the spoken word, take these to heart, and do as I. Oh, 'more subtil than any beast of the field,' farewell, for to-morrow at dawn I depart, that, amid the haunts of men, I may pursue the path so mysteriously revealed to me."

'And so I left him, greatly rejoicing in the new light.

'On the following day I revisited the scene of this most strange occurrence, but the man had gone. Nor could I discover either the goat or raft. I conjectured, therefore, he had acted as he had spoken.

'Some years later, I learnt that a man had appeared from out the wilderness in the great centres of men, who went about preaching these things. While the novelty endured, multitudes, it was reported, flocked to hear him, and he made many converts. But later on, they tired of his doctrines, which were found to be inconvenient for daily practice, so imperative is the dominion of the flesh.

He nevertheless continued his exhortations, which, being brought under the notice of the governors, he was adjudged insane, and was placed in confinement among those afflicted with dangerous delusions. Here, after a few months, he is said to have died of melancholy madness. But for my part, if the person referred to was indeed the hermit of Settlement Island, I think he must have died of disappointment and of a broken heart.'

At this point, Uncle Stretcher announced that his proposed series of 'man-stories' had reached its term; and in spite of the remonstrances of his youthful relatives, he adhered to that resolution. 'There may come,' he said, 'a time when I shall have more to tell you, but at present you are as likely to meet man himself as to hear about him. May my experiences prove of service.'

At these words, Widow Scaley inquired what was the matter; and the old snake replied that, from trustworthy information he had received, there was reason to believe

that the hunters he had already mentioned were now camped in their immediate neighbourhood, and that it would be wiser to leave the district at once than to run any unnecessary risks by remaining. After lengthy discussion, this plan was approved of by the widow, with the result that the family broke up shortly afterwards, not, however, without a most affectionate leave-taking, and reiterated promises to meet again later on, when affairs had quieted down.

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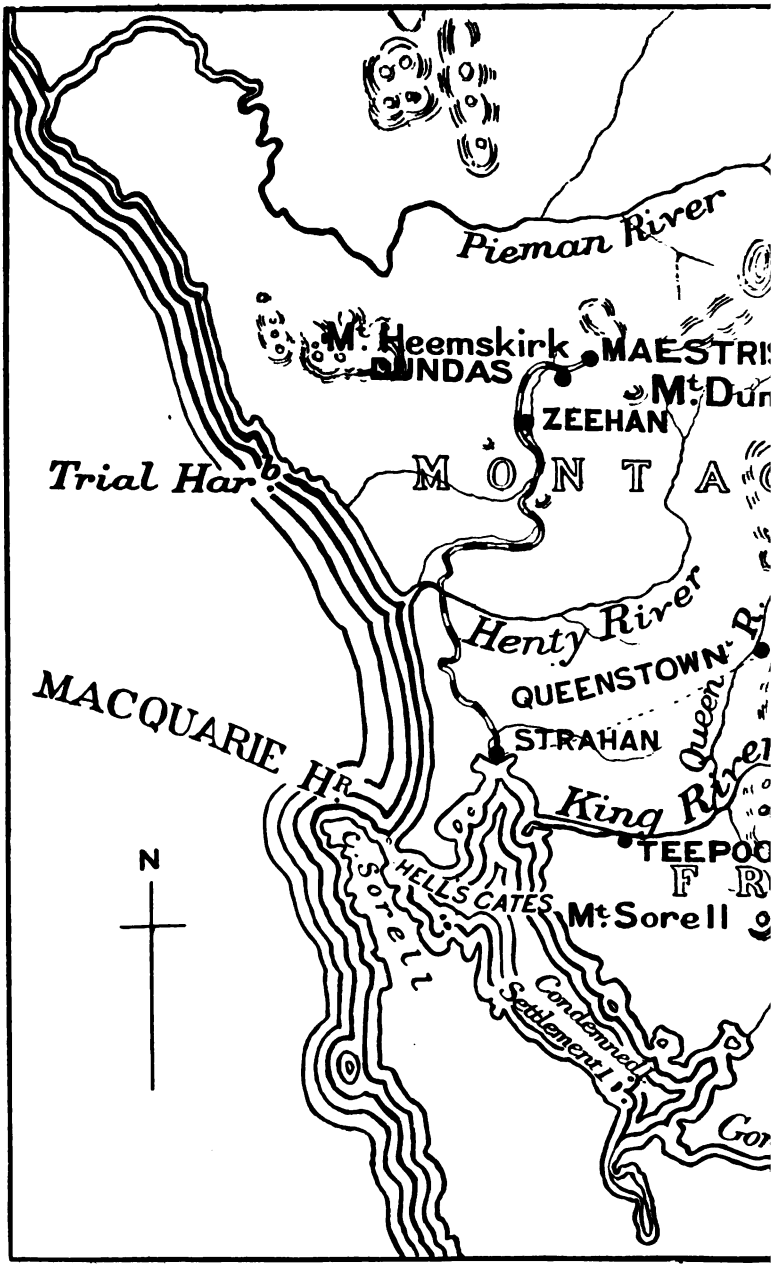
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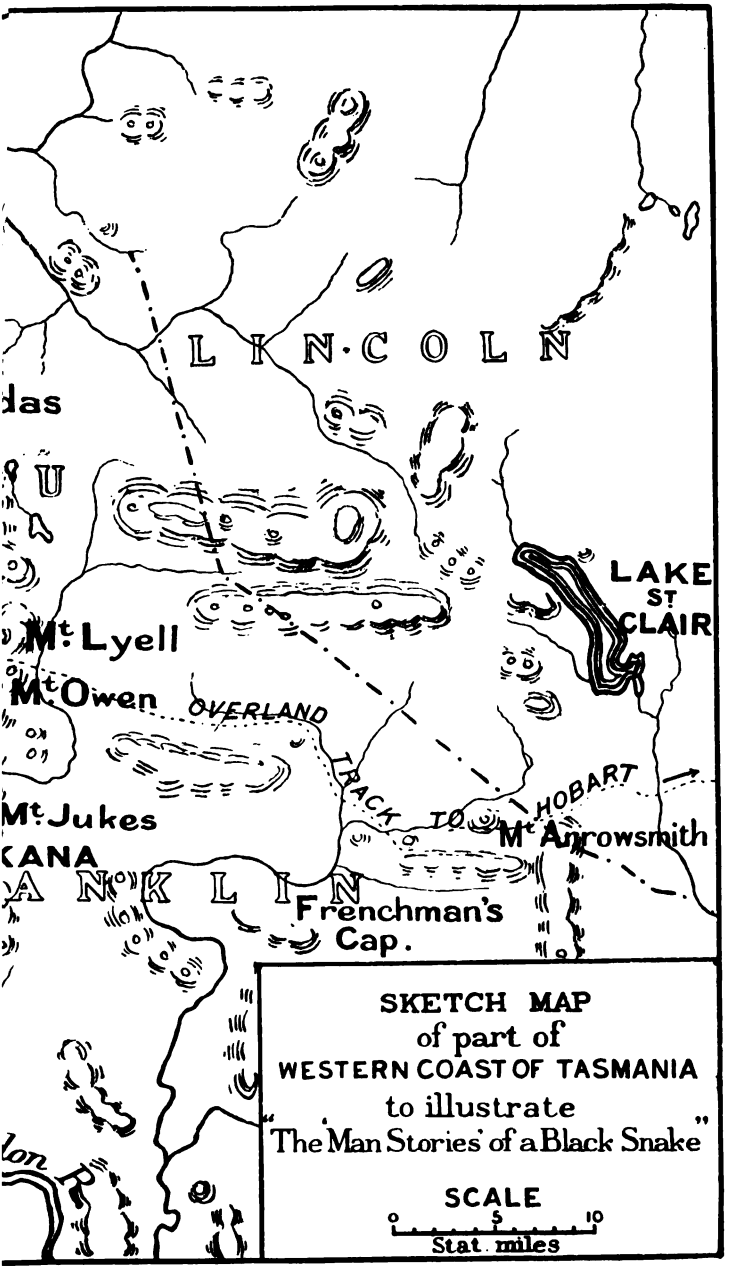
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to illustrate
"The Man Stories of a Black Snake"
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APPENDIX.

On Zeehan.

On the West Coast of Tasmania, and (if we except a bush track over the ranges from the settled districts, now disused, but which in the early days was the usual, and indeed the only, approach) accessible solely by sea, lies Zeehan.

The writer was one of a party who rode over this track in 1892–3. It took the better half of a week (with pack-horses and tents) to cross from Hobart, and not a soul was encountered after leaving the settlements, so that this route may fairly be regarded as now non-existent. There is, however, a cattle track to the North, but this, again, is little

used except for stock which is driven that way. For all practical purposes Zeehan is self-contained, and imports all its necessaries and luxuries by sea *via* its own port — Strachan, and thence by rail, a distance of some thirty miles, into the bosom of the mountains. The railway (such as it is) extends a further eight miles to Dundas and there ends—outgraded.

The sea route is covered by small steamers (the largest 230 tons register) which run to and fro between Hobart and Melbourne respectively, — the bar at the entrance to Macquarie Harbour (the *Hell's Gates* of the convict epoch) allowing passage only to vessels of the lightest draught; it is no unusual circumstance even for these small boats to linger for some minutes as they pass in and out, poised on the bank of sand that constitutes it. The passage (lasting, to Hobart some eighteen hours; to Melbourne, some thirty) is almost invariably rough, the water imperfectly charted, and the rock-bound

shore, on most days of the year, a lee one, and at all times inhospitable, without qualification.

The West Coast, luxuriantly wooded, and scenically beautiful though it is, is not friendly to animal life: snakes are the chief denizens of its bush; higher forms, finding little sustenance, though of course there are a few wallaby and kangaroo, together with some bird life.

The mountains are lofty, their lower slopes heavily clad with forest. The valleys foster rapid streams and torrents amid their dense —in form almost sub-tropical—undergrowth, or frequently expand into deceptive button grass swamps. I know of only one area of good grazing land, a mosquito-infested flat near Mount Lyell, known as the 'Lawn.' Commercial interest in the West Coast is confined, and probably always will be, to mining and its allied industries, and truly within a few square miles an infinite variety of minerals occur: to name the metals derivable from this circumscribed area would be

to mention almost all. So far, however, the mineral development has not passed out of the speculative stage, with perhaps the exception of Mount Lyell itself.

Of course, in these days few places are so utterly out of the world as not to possess a telegraphic wire, and Zeehan, with its population of 2000 men and two cows (I speak of 1893) is properly equipped in that respect. This wire and the doings of the community support, indeed, a daily newspaper, which in turn tempers its isolation.

In these times of co-operative effort and rapid communication, however, even mining camps may savour of the commonplace. What, for instance, can be more commonplace than Johannesburg in Transvaal, or the Denver district of North America? There are intrusions even in the historic west country of the United States.

Turning to Australia, the Ballarat of to-day is a flourishing city, as is also Bendigo, each with railway communication radiating

towards several points of the compass; in the former, indeed, the visitor now runs serious risk of overlooking the mines.

It is only in new or struggling fields that the traveller may encounter his heart's desire. Such, for my part, I have found at Coolgardie, and in certain districts of New Zealand, but chiefly on Zeehan.

Zeehan is distinctive among mining centres fundamentally, but not solely by reason of the nature of its lodes which, although exceptionally rich, especially in their top levels—and the point is important—have nevertheless so far proved thin and variable. Their exploitation is therefore more adapted to small syndicates or to individuals than to large companies.

An attempt has, indeed, been made to organise Zeehan on a scale adequate to speculative purposes on the Melbourne Stock Exchange, and much money has been sunk and energy spent in the endeavour. But the 'boom' was shortlived, and nothing save

starved Companies of from 50,000 to 100,000 shares each (their quotations falling day by day from pounds to shillings, and from shillings to pence, and finally disappearing from the list altogether) survived the first enthusiasm.

Then followed a period of 'tribute,' small parties of miners tempted by the surface richness working the claims under royalty to the great but impoverished Companies, while the 'field' was littered with costly machinery beyond the means of the 'tributers' to work and so gradually but surely falling into hopeless disrepair. It is to be feared that, what with the immense quantity of underground water with which they had to contend and their own lack of financial support, the 'tributers' as a class did no more than keep the wolf from the door, if always that. I know of only one party (the Oonah) that achieved notable success.

Meanwhile, thanks largely to the excellent 'no liability' system of Company organisation

in Australasia a certain amount of speculative development was carried on in the outlying districts by companies financed from Melbourne, Hobart, and Launceston; London being slightly represented by several limited liability concerns.

I would apologise for this detailed reference to the history of an obscure and remote region, were it not that, as it seems to me, we have here a key to the secret of its prevailing interest to the traveller. The very causes of its failure as a great industrial centre, indeed, have nurtured the individuality of its inhabitants, for success and easy communication are great levellers of human life and character.

But more recently affairs on Zeehan have taken a fresh turn, and the district may yet for many years support a large community in comparative comfort.

Not far away also the Mount Lyell mine has caused a new and even more populous centre to spring into existence, which (I

learn from an interesting account in a recent number of the *Statist*) already numbers three thousand souls, and is growing rapidly. About Christmas, 1892, I rode past this spot, desolate in the dense and dripping bush. When I visited it again in 1896 I was accommodated with a seat on the buffer of a locomotive, and the shaft of the smelters, below which a considerable 'township' already nestled, was an unexpected feature in the landscape. To-day the population is as just stated — so swift, so miraculous, is the growth of these settlements.

But there is another side to this question, for with this increase of population on the Coast, talk arises of a transinsular railway from Hobart, whereby what the London *Sketch* (which, in its issue of the 22nd June of this year, published a couple of truly characteristic views of this beautiful region) rightly describes as 'Some of the finest scenery in Australasia, which, through its inaccessibility, has hitherto been a sealed

book to the ordinary tourist,' will at last be brought within reach of that person.

Alas! that I must say it, but I fear, I sadly fear, that this threatened ease of communication, great as its physical benefits must prove, will destroy a vast deal of that individuality among the inhabitants, which in the past has been perhaps the most enticing feature of life on the West Coast. I cannot indeed bring myself patiently to contemplate the time when Messrs Cook will desecrate with prying hordes of sight-seers the sanctuary of so much that is racy in human intercourse and entrancing in nature. That Uncle Stretcher will suffer from the coming invasion is inevitable—he, poor fellow! probably already foresees an unusually troubled future.

Crossing by land from the South-East, after the traveller has passed the brow of Mount Arrowsmith, where, even in the height of summer, snowstorms are by no means uncommon, the character of country and climate

of a sudden change. Behind lies settlement, (at some distance, indeed), and fairly penetrable bush, with, if we except the lakes, no scenic beauty to speak about. Before him, however, a matchless and unbroken forest panorama, tossed and curling over hidden ridges, sunk and silent amid deep valleys and ravines, extends as far as the eye can reach, even to the hazy blue of the great ocean waters. From this point of vantage the scene is indeed unparalleled of its kind in any land.

It is into this sea of vegetation that the West-bound traveller on the overland track thereafter immediately plunges, and no sooner is he down a thousand feet (a diver, so to speak, beneath its feathery surface) than the atmospheric conditions change. No more for him the crisp mountain air and cold dry nights, but sultry moisture and a subtropical wealth of foliage.

All travellers to Zeehan (*via* Strahan) arrive there late in the afternoon, because there is only one passenger train a day, and

just as the afternoon shifts are coming from the mines the passengers arrive; but the first impression obtained of the 'township' depends entirely on the state of the weather.

Zeehan is so young that it has not yet fairly taken root in the soil; indeed there was only one cellar on Zeehan in my time, and that one more a cellar by courtesy than by right. A footing in the dense dripping bush has only been attained by that energy which the allurements common to all mining centres excite in pioneer Anglo-Saxon bosoms. Thus it will readily be understood that the fine buildings, streets, and pavements which render towns tolerable in bad weather do not exist at Zeehan. Zeehan, in short, is a mining camp, a status fully expressed by the local phraseology — Men do not live *in* Zeehan but *on* Zeehan; O! sometimes terribly *on* Zeehan.

Now, when the weather is fine, the traveller, after an exhilarating but tortuous run of two hours in the train, steps out, at an altitude of five

hundred feet, into the pure, crisp bush air, and sees the galvanised iron roofs and the red and yellow painted weather-boarding of the houses gleaming in the light of sunset. To his left towers Mount Zeehan itself, standing bold and rugged out of the bush that clothes its slopes, and accentuating the transparency of the air by its solid and reposeful contours; while away to the right (that is, landwards) rises, peak after peak, a very battalion led by Mounts Reid and Dundas. The surroundings of the station also are clean and bright, and taking one thing with another, he feels he has come among a busy and interesting community which has by no means neglected the arts that tend to make life tolerable even in a remote region.

But if he should arrive on a wild night in winter, that is to say, between May and September (for the seasons of the Northern are reversed in the Southern Hemisphere), he steps out of the train into a heavy drizzle, or perhaps fog, and there is probably a

touch of frost in the air. After some time he will get his baggage carted to the inn at which he has resolved to stay, and will depart himself shortly afterwards in a most antiquated coach, whose weary springs are responsive to every sulky humour of the ill-kept roadway. It is a painful progress, this through Zeehan (for the main street, in fact, is Zeehan, the 'township' not as yet having stooped to side streets), and it is quite possible to undergo a mile or more of floundering in the boggy thoroughfare, ground to sludge under the galena-laden drays which continually traverse it.*

Of course, to the pedestrian, the transit is far worse. I have never passed on foot down Zeehan on a winter's night without wading to the top of my boots in sludge. Most of the inhabitants for this reason wear gaiters. It is true that the lights in the windows fitfully relieve the oppressive gloom

* There has been since 1896 a tramway for mineral traffic which will doubtless remedy this state of things.

which on such occasions as these besets the traveller, but there is no doubt that civilisation on Zeehan has not yet established sufficient buffers between itself and nature to make the town absolutely homely to a stranger in bad weather. Zeehan, in short, is still wild.

But here comes a pleasant surprise. For no sooner does the stranger get to close quarters with those of the community with whom he naturally first comes in contact—'hotel'-keepers and fellow-strangers, let us say—than he encounters a spirit of comradeship which makes amends for all the pranks of nature. There is, indeed, a warm welcome at an inn—at *any* inn—on Zeehan.

And shortly after this gratifying discovery he will make one scarcely less important, to wit, that he is by no means the only stranger there, and that, indeed, many of the most considerable of the sojourners on the field are also living at an inn like himself. The inns, in short, are the clubs of

Zeehan, to stop at which entitles you to the social franchise to just such an extent as the individual factor justifies. But it is very wonderful indeed how soon the newcomer is 'sorted out' on Zeehan. He is 'sorted out,' indeed, almost before he arrives at speaking-terms. The life on Zeehan, as elsewhere, depends on the sojourner's manner of living, but a natural selective process had, at the time of the writer's experience—or *main* experience, for he has paid it three separate visits—set in, whereby the eight or nine leading hostelries in the township attracted, to some extent, specific classes.

Clarke's Hotel was the largest, and boasted of a generous though somewhat middle-class board, while Mulcahy's and Steven's 'All Nations' attracted the better-class nomads of the field. The former, indeed, was renowned for its musical evenings, the latter for its comparatively dainty cuisine and intellectual company, the names of which it would be, of course, invidious to mention.

As residential hotels, the fault of Clarke's was perhaps its noisiness, for it was essentially popular; the fault at Steven's, its imperfect roofing (which *tells* in a wet climate) and the manner in which its upper flooring was laid. When No. 5 (five doors down) arose, his avoirdupois levered up the furniture in No. 1—as also, in a lesser degree, that in Nos. 2 and 3, and it was impossible for Nos. 1, 2, and 3 to sleep (unless they were sailors born) while No. 5 was thus manœuvring. But these, after all, are comical drawbacks.

But the moment the traveller sauntered out of the hotels, it was mud, mud, mud—mud knee-deep on occasion, but never less than ankle-deep; and not only mud, but *gritty* mud, mud that wore boots down heel and toe in less than no time, and as soon as it saw that its *rôle* as mud was 'up,' turned into an equally objectionable dust. But that, of course, was only in summer, when the thermometer climbed

every afternoon like a monkey up a pole, as the saying goes.

Concerning the types of men on the field, there were, firstly, the idle or speculative persons (assembled from every quarter, and mostly stranded after the collapse of the 'boom')—gentlemen all; secondly, the official class, which occasionally included members of the first, but in the main, consisted of foreign representatives, mining managers, local brokers, attorneys, and perhaps (for subterranean reasons) the leading store-keepers; thirdly, the actual miners. A fourth class there also was which wavered between all the three above-mentioned according to the course of speculation, but the members of this usually ended in obscurity.

It is no part of my purpose to specifically identify the characters of the 'Man-Stories' with any of these classes, though, indeed, each belongs to some one.

Women were few, and socially speaking, for the most part, submissive to extinction—a

not unfrequent characteristic of the sex, indeed (be it said without implied reproach to the men), in young and virile communities.

This streak of primitive civilisation is hemmed so closely in by the primeval bush that it is the easiest thing in the world to escape from one to the other. At certain points a few hundred paces at right angles to the main street suffices to transport one from the irregular yet monotonous vista of painted weather-boarding into mysterious depths of translucent greenery and impenetrable gloom, where the pitiless struggle for life is conducted in contrasting silence.

In these regions (skirted, and for some distance penetrated by wooden tramway lines connecting often abandoned mining claims with the local metropolis), crossing treacherous swamps by corduroy (that is, log) roads, and rivers by fallen tree-trunks or, perchance, by a rude bridge, may one regain touch with the eternal life of the Coast, and refresh mind and body amid cathedral

aisles of towering stems, beneath lofty canopies whence daylight falls dim and green on tree-fern and creeper, and the sassafras rears its luminous young foliage candelabrum-like before woodland altars and shrines of shrub and fern and decaying timber. Silent and echoless vaults, your spell lies still upon me!

Pushing on for higher ground the wayfarer encounters the rugged outworks of the mountains, tediously ascended through swamps and claws of forest. Unique among all this is the lakelike expanse of Macquarie Harbour, its fairy islands of terrible history, and the surrounding mountain-heights whence pour the full waters of the Gordon and King Rivers. The scenery of the latter, with its tributary the Queen River, is not less than magnificent. Since opened up by the short line of the Mount Lyell Railway Company, it will be strange if it does not in time attract the attention of the tourist. Certainly nothing grander of its kind may be imagined than the

avenue that from the Teepookana terminus to its mouth lines, like a sylvan guard of honour, the course of the river, till it is lost for ever in the mixed floods of the Harbour.

But memory teems as I write,—the evening visit to the convict graveyard on Dead Island, with its wooden foot-high gravestones carved only with initials and the year of death, planted here and there among the gum trees; the night spent camped in the open on Settlement Island, when the provisions ran short; and the next morning when we, perforce, broke our fasts with mint leaves and raspberries escaped from the Governor's old garden; the black snake (such a fine fellow!), who appeared to be its only occupant, and possibly still remains so, for he was vigilant enough to elude our most bloodthirsty schemes.

These, however, are brief notes—too brief, perhaps, for service — yet it behoves me to remember that the joy of such memories perishes in their description. Writing, moreover, far from the regions described, in one of

the fairest spots that gem the most beautiful of all rivers—the English Thames—at a time when the twilight fondles the landscape, and the grey-black bars of tired cloud spin horizontal webs among the slender stems which outline the now obscure course of the quiet stream, I am awed by the depth of contrast between the wild majesty of the land of my thought and the peaceful, the incomparable beauty of this of my being.

W. A. B.

ABOVE COOKHAM,
19*th July* 1898.

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